

# **The Heretic**

**Michael Bakunin, “Apostle of Pan-Destruction”**

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A Russian nobleman of royal ancestry, he was the most eloquent champion of the peasants in revolt against their feudal and semi-feudal masters. Born to wealth, he preferred the life of a homeless wanderer living on the bounty of his friends and followers. A despot and authoritarian by nature, he was the teacher of a gospel that rejected all authority, all compulsion. An internationalist in the scope of his activities, he was at heart a Slavic chauvinist who hated and loathed the Germans and the Jews. A self-confessed disciple of Karl Marx, he was his most bitter enemy. More famous and influential than his teacher during his lifetime, he was to shrink to the stature of a mere icon of a dying sect. The real grandfather and precursor of Bolshevism, he has been denied by his grandchildren, who even begrudge him a monument. An apostle who inspired religious devotion in countless Spanish and Italian workers, he was to become skeptical of his own beliefs during the last years of his life. A hero of revolutionary uprisings all over Europe, twice condemned to death, and buried alive in Russia's most horrible dungeons — yet dying peacefully as a broken old man in a Swiss hospital. Such was the life of this Russian of genius, whose courage was as boundless as his body was gigantic; this titanic adolescent who, born in another period, might have become a legendary hero of popular folksongs, the founder of a militant religion, like Mohammed, or the God-Emperor of an authoritarian State, like Lenin.

Michael Bakunin was born in 1814 in a village of the Tver province in Central Russia. His father, a landed nobleman, was a man of culture who had seen Europe in the diplomatic service of his country. To a certain extent a man of Western ideas, he never let them interfere with the ownership of his thousand "souls," as the serfs were called in those days. When his eldest son Michael was fourteen years old, he sent him to the Saint Petersburg Artillery School to prepare for the usual career of a scion of the Russian nobility.

Young Bakunin graduated at the age of eighteen. He did not show much enthusiasm for his studies and actually "flunked" a post-graduate examination. As a result, he was sent to serve in a small garrison in the West, in what is now Lithuania. He showed even less enthusiasm for the life the other officers were leading and took the first opportunity to quit the service.

Thus at the age of twenty-one he was at the end of his military career. As a substitute, he was now offered the possibility of becoming an official in the secret service. This too failed to arouse his enthusiasm. Hazily he longed for a life on a higher plane; a life of noble adventure rather than military laurels; a life devoted to the acquisition of knowledge rather than to social duties and the usual diversions of the younger set. This handsome giant was adored by the fair sex — yet throughout his life he seems to have had no erotic interests whatsoever.

Having left the army, he yielded to his predilection for philosophical speculation. To teach that sublime subject, to enter upon an academic career, now became his great ambition. It is not a mere curious coincidence that both Bakunin and Marx, who later were to become champions and antagonists in the revolutionary arena of Europe, started with the same goal before their eyes. In those years every man who was ahead of his time felt crushed between the weight of police omnipotence on the one hand and the hopeless ignorance and passivity of the masses on the other. Philosophy was the escape of the pioneer type of intellectual who found no taste in the vulgar pleasures of the ruling set. It also gave him an opportunity to discover his own superiority to the real masters, who were more interested in ephemeral realities than in eternal truths.

In the Thirties, Russia, like Germany and Austria, was still passing through that period of pan-European reaction which had been inaugurated by the Holy Alliance after the fall of Napoleon. In Russia this reaction was strengthened by the memory of the "Decembrist" conspirators, those liberal aristocrats of 1825 whose uprising, if successful, would have greatly hastened Russia's

progress along the road of Westernization. Liberal- constitutionalist sentiment had not died out among the most enlightened sections of the upper classes. But it found expression chiefly in literary or philosophical discussions conducted in private circles.

In Russia, just as in Germany, Hegel was at that time the philosopher who enjoyed general recognition among all educated people, no matter what their stand might be with regard to the existing conditions. He was the final authority on all matters, just as Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas had been during previous epochs, or as in certain circles of the advanced intelligentsia Hegel's disciple Marx was to become half a century later.

Hegel's philosophy could be interpreted both as a defense of the *status quo* and as a justification of the opposition to it. The Russian biographer of Bakunin, Steklov, is apparently right in his assumption that, in the mood of helplessness then prevailing among the intellectuals of Russia, Hegel's justification of what existed ("everything that is real is reasonable") was a sop to those who, though dissatisfied with the regime of Nicholas I, felt quite powerless to challenge it. In fact, to Bakunin this philosophy became more than a sop. For a while he seems to have accepted it wholeheartedly in the sense of "a reconciliation with reality in all relations and in all ways of life." In other words, the young ex-officer, turned seeker after truth, had at first become a conservative, at least with his head. With his temperament, however, he was more inclined to oppose that "reality" which his mind had told him to accept. Witness his aversion towards those "Slavophile" intellectuals who meekly submitted to the powerful machine of Asiatic despotism and found a compensation for their sense of inferiority in thunderings against the "decaying" West. Though he too was imbued with the spirit of Slavic nationalism, he preferred the company of those courageous individuals who came out openly in favor of Westernization.

## The First Steps

In 1840 Bakunin felt that his hunger for deeper penetration into the mysteries of philosophy could no longer be satisfied in his native country. He left for Berlin, the center of philosophical thought on the European Continent. At the University of Berlin the brilliant Russian ex-ensign soon attracted the attention of the German professors. But Bakunin himself soon lost interest in pure speculation. He had come in contact with some of Hegel's Left Wing disciples, the Young Hegelians, who would argue that if what was "real" (that is, what existed) was reasonable, then the opposition or contradiction called forth by that which existed was likewise reasonable. For all things were in a state of flux. Thus revolution against the status quo found its philosophical justification and could cover itself with the mantle of Hegel. Philosophical radicalism contributed towards turning Bakunin's interest to the study of the more earthly subjects, such as economics, history, and politics.

He began to read about the socialist and communist movements in France. Did the revolutionary movement then brewing in most European countries turn his mind definitely from metaphysics toward active participation in the historical process? Did his personal tragedy, the sense of inferiority which he felt by reason of his emotional inadequacy, play a certain part in his sudden determination to imprint the stamp of his personality upon the fate of humanity at large? A letter to his family, dated November 4, 1842, contains the following telling passage: "I have a great future before me. My forebodings cannot deceive me. If I can but succeed in fulfilling only a small part of that which swells my breast, I do not want anything more. I do not want happiness, I do not think of happiness; I want work, stern work, sacred work. There is a wide field before me, and my lot will not be a small one."

The first step in his revolutionary career was an article entitled "Reaction in Germany," which appeared in 1842 in the *Deutsche Jahrbücher* (German Yearbooks), published by the Young Hegelian, Arnold Ruge. He was the same German writer who later was to be associated with Karl Marx's first venture in revolutionary literature. That article of Bakunin's was published under a French pseudonym. Couched in highly technical philosophical language, it was an inspired defense of revolution, and contained the exclamation which has since become historic: "The Urge of destruction is at the same time a creative urge!" The censor did not understand what it was all about and let the article pass. But that famous saying contributed its part in giving Bakunin that reputation of an "Apostle of Pan-Destruction" which a sensational press for many years attached to his name. In reality, however, it was merely his way of expressing his groping ardor for a thoroughgoing change in the direction of more democracy, more freedom, more social justice.

## Meeting the Teachers

Early in 1843 Bakunin went to Switzerland. In Zurich he made his first contact with the communist movement, as represented by the following of the German tailor, Wilhelm Weitling.<sup>1</sup> The Russian truth-seeker was impressed by the picturesque personality of the new prophet, but he was not attracted to his system which he visualized as “a forcibly organized herd of cattle pursuing exclusively material interests and entirely disregarding the spiritual aspects of life.”

Weitling was soon arrested by the Swiss authorities and later delivered into the hands of the Prussian police. Bakunin’s name was mentioned in some of the papers found in the home of the German revolutionist and from now on the Russian Government was fully aware of the “bad company” the black sheep of its nobility was keeping. He was officially summoned to return to his country. When he refused he was deprived of his title of nobility, condemned to hard labor in Siberia and to confiscation of his property, should he ever inherit his father’s estate.

Apprised that the Zurich authorities intended to arrest him, Bakunin left for Brussels, one of the centers for the political refugees and exiles of the period. There he met Joachim Lelewel, Polish historian and patriot, who had participated in the national uprising of 1831. This meeting to a certain extent marks the beginning of that period of Bakunin’s life — it lasted more than twenty years — during which his activities and his thoughts were devoted to the cause of the democratic emancipation of the Slavic races. For, strange as it may sound, the father of modern international anarchism was a nationalist the greater part of his life. Nationalism, it is true, was in those years closely connected with democratic and revolutionary ideas. It was only during the last decade of his life that his interests turned exclusively toward the labor movement and the spread of those ideas which were to become known as anarchism.

From Brussels he went to Paris. In 1843 the capital of France was the gathering point of liberals and radicals of various schools. Of these, two made the greatest impression upon Bakunin: Proudhon, usually called the father of anarchism, and Karl Marx, the father of modern socialism and communism. Bakunin did not meet the great conspirator Blanqui, who was in prison at the time. Nor did he ever meet him in later years.

At that time Marx was known only to a small group of German radicals, while Proudhon had an established reputation as the brilliant author of *What Is Property?* Bakunin was attracted to both of them. With Marx he had in common his training in German philosophy; from Proudhon he eagerly accepted his libertarian outlook, his “negation” of the State. With Marx he turned against the purely idealistic conceptions of their former master Hegel. He was inclined to accept the young German radical’s materialistic interpretation of history, then in the process of elaboration. In fact, Marx’s great antagonist of twenty years later was one of the first non-German “Marxists,” so to speak. Nearly thirty years later, in a book published in 1873, Bakunin wrote that “No doubt there is much truth in the merciless criticism directed by him [Marx] against Proudhon; Proudhon, in spite of all his efforts to stand on firm ground, has remained an idealist and a

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter on Karl Marx.

metaphysician. His point of departure is the abstract idea of right; from the right he proceeds to the economic fact; while Mr. Marx, in contrast to Proudhon, has spoken out and proved that incontestable truth which has been confirmed by the entire past and present history of human society, peoples and states, that the economic fact has always preceded the juridical and political right. The presentation and proof of this constitutes one of the main scientific merits of Mr. Marx.”

Bakunin had expressed similar ideas three years before, in a letter written in 1870. “As a thinker,” he wrote, “Marx is on the right road. He has established the principle that all religious, political, juridical developments in history are not the causes but the effects of economic developments. This great and fruitful thought was not excogitated by him; it was foreseen, partly even expressed by many others. But at bottom it is his merit to have given it a solid foundation and to have made it the basis of his whole economic system. On the other hand, Proudhon understood and felt liberty much better than Marx did. Whenever Proudhon does not fall into dogmatism and metaphysics he has the real instinct of a revolutionist; he adores Satan and preaches anarchy. It is quite possible that Marx could rise theoretically to a still more rational system of liberty than Proudhon, but he lacks Proudhon’s instinct.”<sup>2</sup> It was apparently on account of this “instinct” that Bakunin felt personally closer to Proudhon. The French writer’s “an-archy,” that is, “no-government,” appealed to his emotional craving for the absolute, for the millennium, or, politically speaking, for a “maximum program.” At the same time, Proudhon’s insistence upon decentralization, which in the non-English languages is usually referred to as “federalism,” answered to a certain extent Bakunin’s need for a “minimum program” which could be carried out immediately.

In another respect, however, Marx was bound to appeal to the Russian much more than did Proudhon. Living in France, under a near-constitutional regime which granted political liberties giving some leeway to opponents of the regime, Proudhon could have some hope — justified or not — that peaceful persuasion might bring about the changes which he desired. Not so Marx. At that time he was a revolutionist in the literal sense of the word: that is, he believed that the existing scheme of things would yield only to a violent uprising of the dissatisfied masses. This was natural in his case, not only because he had a better insight into the depth of the social antagonisms, but also because he came from absolutist, semifeudal Germany, where only a naive dreamer could expect the ruling nobility and bureaucracy to relinquish their privileges without a violent struggle. Still less could a peaceful solution be expected in semi-Asiatic, despotic Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> Immediately upon these words there follows the sentence: “In his capacity as a German and as a Jew he [Marx] is an authoritarian from the top of his head to his heel.” It will be seen later that Bakunin’s thrust against German “authoritarianism” was chiefly directed against German nationalism, of which he suspected Marx.



## The Great Slander

In 1845 Bakunin made his first public appearance in the French press. In an article printed in the liberal paper *La Refonne* he attacked the Tsarist system, the institution of serfdom, the absolute lack of any political liberty, the oppression of its national minorities. The article won Bakunin the sympathies of the numerous Polish emigrants in Western Europe. Two years later he was invited by them to speak at a banquet commemorating the Polish uprising of 1831. That speech was published and aroused the great ire of the Russian Ambassador. Unable to strike at Bakunin in any other way, he resorted to the infernal device of destroying his character in the eyes of the radical public. In a most insidious way the Russian diplomat and his agents began to spread the rumor that Bakunin had been employed in their secret service and had been discharged by them. They also hinted at financial irregularities. The stories were believed — particularly by the Poles. To them a Russian who sympathized with their cause was an enigma anyhow. Moreover, Bakunin's means of support were unknown — his family certainly could not send him anything if his opposition to the regime was genuine. He had no occupation or any other source of income, and so again people were ready to believe the worst. The fact was that he lived in great poverty most of his life — by borrowing money from various friends. He always had a number of admirers or sympathizers who were ready to keep him from starvation.

While spreading these rumors, the Russian Ambassador at the same time used diplomatic pressure to have the dangerous agitator expelled from France. Bakunin left for Brussels, where he remained for a few months, until the Revolution of February, 1848, enabled him to return to Paris.

## From Paris to Poland

The sight of revolutionary Paris intoxicated him. For days he imbibed its spirit. He stayed, ate and slept in one of the capital's barracks and talked to the "Montagnards." This was the name of the heroic elite of the proletarian barricade fighters, who had been rewarded with picturesque uniforms and the steady pay of a new revolutionary police force.

The record of those days, as set down in his Confession, written three years later, is poetical prose of the first order. It is filled with retrospective melancholy at the thought of the miserable fate of that Revolution. "If those people," he wrote, "if those French workers had found a leader worthy of them, capable of understanding them and of loving them, that leader would have accomplished miracles with them." Did he have visions of himself as such a miracle man, had he been a Frenchman, or at least a Corsican?

It may seem that to a certain extent the new masters of the country sensed his potential powers. Caussidiere, the new Chief of the Police, who for years had been a conspirator against the monarchy, expressed the apprehension felt by the enthroned republican aristocracy in the famous words, "What a man! What a man! A jewel on the first day of the Revolution, but he should be shot on the next!" For to Bakunin the Republic was not the end, but merely the beginning of the Revolution. What he was preaching at that time was a combination of the most extreme equalitarian anarchist socialism for the civilized West with a democratic nationalism for the backward Slavic East.

However, a revolution in the East was nearer to his heart. A radical member of the new French Cabinet advanced two thousand francs from the Treasury to get him out of the country. Bakunin went to Germany to take up his quarters somewhere on the eastern border. There he could help the Poles to rise against Prussia, Austria, and Russia. He could also contribute to the spread of the revolutionary contagion to the various Slavic races living under the German and Hungarian domination of the Hapsburg monarchy. And he could dream of the miracle of a revolution in Russia as well. Bakunin went to Bres-lau in Silesia, the southeasternmost section of Prussia. His hopes of getting in touch with Polish emigrants came to naught. The Poles did not trust him. They had heard of the rumors spread by the Russian Embassy in Paris and were inclined to believe them.

## The Austrian Slavs

From the Poles Bakunin turned to the Slavs of Austria, particularly to the Czechs. It was among them that he hoped to find his Archimedean “place to stand” from which he could “move the earth.” The Revolution of March, 1848, in Vienna, and the revolutionary events in Hungary had aroused the hopes of the Slavs living under the dual monarchy. Soon enough, however, the Czechs and the Slovaks in the North and the Croats in the South realized that the German-Austrian and Hungarian democrats had no intention of releasing their grip upon those races which had lived in subjection to Hapsburg rule. These strange German-Austrian fighters for liberty found it quite consistent with their democratic ideals to send troops for combating the Italian patriots who wanted independence from the dual monarchy — just as the democratic German Parliament at Frankfort, likewise a child of the Revolution of March, 1848, took a typically nationalistic attitude toward the Polish uprising in the Prussian province of Posen.

Naturally enough, the middle classes of the Slavic races reciprocated. With the connivance of the reactionary spheres they were now out to turn the tables on their German and Hungarian would-be masters. They devised the idea of a reorganized Hapsburg Empire in which the Slavic privileged groups would be on top. In order to further this idea they called a Congress of the Slavic Nationalities to be held in Prague in the middle of May, 1848.

Bakunin decided to participate in that Congress. He wanted to offer the assembled delegates a higher ideal of Slavic liberation. What he aimed at was nothing less than the destruction of the Austrian Empire, after which all the Slavic races would form a federated Slavic Republic — stretching apparently from the Pacific to the very heart of Europe. It was a large order, calling for a series of revolutions that would turn half of Europe upside-down, but this was exactly what Bakunin’s soul was longing for. That Slavic pipe-dream had a few non-Slavic flaws: the German Sudeten minority was to remain within the orbit of Prague; the Hungarians, the Rumanians, and the Greeks were to lose their independence because their lands were merely small islands surrounded by the great Slavic sea; and half-Turkish, half-Greek Constantinople was to become the capital of the great Slavic Federation. The dream had some similarities to the Pan-Slavic ambitions of the Tsarist statesmen — except, of course, that the object of Bakunin’s aspirations was to be a democratic republican federation, which would do away with all the remnants of feudalism.

Needless to say, the delegates at the Slavic Congress were not interested in the grandiose scheme of the lone Russian romantic — even though that dreamer was a greater realist than these politicians, for he foresaw and warned them that the Haps-burgs would bear them no gratitude, and that, having finished with the German-Austrian and the Hungarian rebels, they would again reduce the Slavs to the same old thralldom. In that difficult situation he was trying to find a way that would reconcile the ambitions of the German and Hungarian democrats with those of the Slavs.

Bakunin’s ideas struck a responsive chord among a few Slovaks, Moravians, Serbs and Croats. With them he founded a secret organization called “the Slavic Friends.” But before Bakunin’s

organization had any chance of extending its activities, an uprising took place in Prague. Organized by the Czech university students and one of the radical Czech parties, that revolt reflected the mood of the dissatisfied poorer sections of the Czech population. Bakunin had not been initiated into the plans; but when the fight started he took a rifle and fought on the barricades. When the struggle was nearing its end, he advised the students to depose the Czech Provisional Government which was negotiating with the Austrian military commander, and to establish a "military committee with dictatorial powers." His advice was accepted, but before anything could be done the fight was over. The defeat of the uprising led to the dispersion of the delegates to the Slavic Congress and to the disappearance of Bakunin's short-lived Slavic Friends. Bakunin succeeded in escaping to Germany.

## The Agony of a Revolution

The victory of the Austrian Army over the insurgents of Prague in the middle of June, 1848, was one of the symptoms of the impending doom of revolution on the Continent. Bakunin saw it coming and he blamed it largely on the blind selfishness of the German democrats. For only a united front of all races of Central and Southern Europe could have prevented a comeback of monarchist reaction.

His growing anti-German sentiment was greatly intensified by a personal injury done him by a German democratic publication, the daily *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne, which was edited by Karl Marx. The author of the *Communist Manifesto*, who was now a member of the Left Wing of the German Democratic Party, was well aware of the shortcomings of the German democrats. But German national feeling was strong enough in him to render him even more hostile to Bakunin's revolutionary Pan-Slavism than to the simple chauvinism of the German democrats. He doubtless felt that Bakunin's aims were part and parcel of the Tsarist Pan-Slavic policy, which was out to conquer all the Slavic territories in Central and Southern Europe. In the issue of July 6, 1848, his newspaper inserted a little note saying: "With regard to the Slavic propaganda, we were informed yesterday that George Sand is in possession of papers seriously compromising the reputation of the Russian exile, M. Bakunin. They represent him as a tool or a newly-engaged Russian agent who is chiefly responsible for the recent arrests among the unfortunate Poles. George Sand has shown these papers to some of her friends." George Sand had not shown these papers to anybody, because she never had them, and she sent an energetic protest to Marx's paper testifying to the soundness of Bakunin's character. Marx, who apparently had been misled by gossip-mongers, published her letter — not, however, without patting himself on the back for the two performances: "We have thus fulfilled the duty of the press to watch public characters rigorously," he wrote, "and at the same time we have given Mr. Bakunin an opportunity to dispel a suspicion which certainly had been raised in Paris in certain circles." It was a peculiar way of showing his concern over the good name of Bakunin.

Bakunin knew that the slander had originated in the Russian Embassy. He had suffered from it greatly during the crucial months of 1848, when it raised a barrier of suspicion between him and other revolutionists. The repetition of the same stories by Marx, even though followed by a retraction, left a deep scar in his personal relations with his future rival for revolutionary leadership.

He was not permitted to stay long in Prussia. Expelled from both Berlin and Breslau, he went to Dresden, but eventually had to settle in the small principality of Anhalt — a sort of ultra-liberal oasis surrounded by the Prussian conservative desert. Here, from a quiet vantage-point, he could watch the gradual advance of reaction through Central Europe, and particularly the march of a pro-Hapsburg Croatian army against democratic Vienna. The clever game of the Austrian dynasty, in using the Slavs against the democratic but chauvinistic Germans and Hungarians, was bearing fruit. A rapprochement between the Slavs and their opponents was necessary in order to avoid a complete triumph of the counterrevolution. Bakunin wrote a pamphlet published in

German and entitled *Appeal to the Slavs*, which stressed the necessity for an understanding with the German and Hungarian democrats. The pamphlet found a very friendly reception in Prague, and helped Bakunin to renew his connections with the Czech democrats.

These connections were now of great importance to him. The German democrats were now preparing for a general uprising which was slated for the spring of 1849. The Hungarians were asserting their independence, arms in hand. Bakunin hoped his followers in Prague would stir up a popular uprising in Bohemia that would be the link between the German and Hungarian revolutions.

# Anarchist Dictatorship

Bohemia was at that time economically more advanced than most of the other sections of the dual monarchy. It had a large number of industrial workers. These, in Bakunin's opinion, were "the predestined recruits of democratic propaganda." Bakunin had stayed long enough in France to understand that in the West at least a successful revolution was unthinkable without the support of the industrial workers.

"I aspired," he says in his *Confession*, "to an absolute, radical revolution in Bohemia, in short, to a revolution which, even if it were suppressed, would succeed in upsetting everything. I wanted to take advantage of the favorable circumstance that the entire nobility in Bohemia and the entire class of rich property-holders were composed exclusively of Germans, in order to exile all the noblemen and the hostile clergy; and, after the estates of the feudal lords had been seized, one part of them would be distributed among the poor peasants in order to win them over to the revolution, while the remainder would be used for creating extraordinary revenues for the revolution. It was my intention to destroy all castles, to burn all administrative records and all titles of the feudal lords, to declare null and void all mortgages, as well as other debts not exceeding a certain amount, for instance, one thousand or two thousand gulden. In short, the revolution which I planned was ... to be directed against institutions [things] rather than against human beings." Bakunin goes on to explain that this revolution would not have been limited to one race, that it would soon have embraced all Slavs; that it would have contributed to inciting a mass revolution in Germany. It would also have led to the fall of the Hapsburg monarchy by lending assistance to the Hungarians fighting for independence, and by uniting all Slavic peoples in a Slavic federation.

Pursuing his idea, Bakunin turns to the political aspects of his revolution. "The government was to be established in Prague; it was to be provided with unlimited dictatorial powers ... the entire Austrian administration was to be definitely abolished and the functionaries were to be removed. Only some of the most important and best informed among them would have been kept in Prague, to serve as advisers and to furnish statistical information. *All clubs, all newspapers, all the manifestations of a gabbing anarchy would likewise have been suppressed. Everything was to be subjected to a dictatorial power.* [Italics mine, M. N.] The youth and all the capable men, divided into categories according to their character, their capacities, and their personal inclinations, would have been distributed throughout the country in order to assure it a provisional, revolutionary and military organization. The masses would have been divided into two groups; those of the first group, armed in one way or another, were to remain at home to protect the new order; if need be they could be used for guerilla warfare. On the other hand, all the young people, all poor men able to carry arms, the unemployed industrial workers and artisans, as well as a large part of the educated bourgeois youth, would have constituted an army — not an army of partisans, but a regular army, formed with the help of former Polish officers, and retired Austrian soldiers and non-commissioned officers who could be raised to the various higher ranks in accordance with their capacity and their zeal. The expenditures would have been enormous, but

I expected to cover them partly from the proceeds of the confiscations and from extraordinary revenues, as well as by ‘assignats’ similar to those issued by Kossuth.”

All this has a very familiar ring. With a few changes all of these revolutionary dreams of young Bakunin — he was thirty-four years old when he conceived the plan — were to be carried out on a much larger scale seventy years later by Lenin, a Russian nobleman like himself, and particularly by Trotsky, one of those Jewish intellectuals whom Bakunin so despised. Similar methods were at that time identified with the name of Blanqui, and shortly after those events Marx likewise was to come out in favor of extreme measures of this kind. But Bakunin, though strongly influenced by Marx — who at that moment did not take such a radical position as yet — was an admirer of Proudhon and considered himself an Anarchist, that is, an enemy of all organized government. But he could not escape that tragic situation which confronts every radical school advocating the complete abolition of oppression and exploitation. *For between the capitalist hell of wage slavery and the socialist, communist, syndicalist or anarchist heaven of social and economic equality, there stands the inevitable transitional phase with its dictatorial or democratic bureaucracy, its military officers and its technical experts, all of whom will insist upon the necessity of a strong government and of higher emoluments and softer jobs for the owners of superior brains. And the transitional phase becomes “transitional” only in a cosmic sense, for its beneficiaries will use their newly acquired power for the purpose of perpetuating that upphase,” until a new revolution ushers in a new transitional phase, with another set of “transitional” officeholders.*

An “anarchism” of the same kind Bakunin had in store for his own country as well. Speaking of the form of government which the victorious revolution would introduce in Russia, he says:

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I believe that in Russia, more than elsewhere, a strong dictatorial power will be necessary, a power which will be exclusively preoccupied with raising the education of the masses; a power free in its tendencies and in its spirit, but without parliamentary forms; printing books of a free content, but without liberty of the press; a power surrounded by partisans, enlightened by their advice, strengthened by their free collaboration, but not limited by anything or anybody. I told myself that the difference between this dictatorship and the monarchist power would consist exclusively in this: that the former, in accordance with the spirit of its principles, ought to have the tendency towards rendering its own existence superfluous [*italics mine* — M. N.], for it would have no other aim than freedom, independence, and the progressive maturity of the people, while the monarchist power would, on the contrary, always endeavor to render its own existence indispensable, and would consequently be obliged to keep its subjects in a perpetual condition of ignorance. I did not know what would follow the dictatorship, and I thought that nobody could foresee it.

(The Anarchist historian and biographer of Bakunin, Max Nettlau, was decidedly embarrassed by the passages which show that Bakunin was the true spiritual father of the Bolsheviks with their cant about the eventual voluntary abdication of dictatorship, the Marxian “withering away of the State,” and the like. So in his notes to the *Confession* (p. 325) he writes quite naively: “This passage has been quoted in order to build up the legend that Bakunin was in favor of a dictatorship. However, simple fairness should enable the reader to see that what he [Bakunin] desired was, so to speak, the technical dictatorship of the bootblack, of soap and of the broom,



of elementary intellectual, moral and social hygiene, for a country that has been the victim of enormous neglect.” In a similar way Sidney and Beatrice Webb, in their *Soviet Communism — A New Civilization?* denied that there was any dictatorship in Russia at all, presenting Stalin’s Genghis-Khan despotism as the purest form of democracy.)

# The Great Conspiracy

To bring about that revolution, Bakunin suggested to his followers in Prague the formation of a secret society that would embrace all of Bohemia. In fact, there were to be three secret organizations: —

One for the lower middle classes, one for the youth, and one for the rural regions. Each of them would be subjected to a strict hierarchy and to absolute discipline... These societies were to be limited to a small number of persons, but would include, as far as possible, all men of talent, knowledge, intelligence and influence, who, while obeying a central authority, would in turn exert a sort of invisible sway over the masses. These three societies would be integrated by a Central Committee composed of three or at most five members: myself, Arnold [Bakunin's chief agent in Prague], and others... After the success of the revolution my secret society would not be dispersed; on the contrary, it would be strengthened ... and gradually it would embrace all Slavic lands; I hoped it would likewise furnish the men for the various tasks of the revolutionary hierarchy. Finally, I hoped with its help to be able to create and consolidate my influence in Bohemia: for, without the knowledge of Arnold, I had at the same time entrusted a young German student from Vienna with the organization, according to the same plan, of a society among the Germans of Bohemia of which I would be the secret chief without at first being ostensibly a member of its Central Committee. Thus, if my plan had been realized, all the essential threads of the movement would have been concentrated in my hands, and I would have been sure that the revolution, planned for Bohemia, would never have deviated from the path which I had mapped out for it. As regards the revolutionary government, ... I did not know whether I would take part in it openly, but it seemed to me certain that I would participate in a direct and intensive way.<sup>1</sup>

(The same principle of organization and revolutionary government is found in the statutes of Bakunin's secret societies of the later Sixties during the more outspoken phase of what is called his "Anarchism.")

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<sup>1</sup> *Confession*, pp. 222–224. Max Nettlau, scholarly historian and apologist of Anarchism, in annotating this passage, on page 331 of that book, says innocently that "it was exactly the task of the 'invisible dictatorship' to discard the real dictatorship." Thus the gist of Bakunin's revolutionary theory seems to have been that once a revolutionist adopts the label of anarchism, he becomes magically divested of the normal passions and temptations of all those who gain power.

# The Dresden Uprising

In the spring of 1849 Bakunin went illegally to Dresden, the capital of Saxony, in order to be in closer contact with his followers in Bohemia. He expected his Czech fellow-conspirators to call him at any moment to Prague, where he could take charge of the uprising. But a peculiar unlucky star seemed to hang over his plans. Quite unexpectedly the revolution, instead of breaking out where he wanted it, occurred in the very city in which he was staying. The uprising in Dresden was caused by the refusal of the King of Saxony to approve the Constitution adopted by the National Assembly in Frankfort. By dismissing the Saxon Diet which had voted for it the King aroused the respectable middle class democrats, who took up arms and established a Provisional Government.

The uprising started on May 3, 1849. It was eventually subdued by Prussian troops which came to the assistance of the Saxon dynasty. By his participation in this struggle alone Bakunin has earned an honorable place among the noblest revolutionary figures of modern times. It was not his revolution; he did not have a high opinion of the German liberals and democrats; their struggle for democracy and national unity was marred by their German nationalism which took it for granted that the "inferior" races should be kept "in their place" — and Bakunin himself belonged to one of those despised inferior races. His own revolution which he contemplated in Bohemia was in immediate need of his leadership; and it had, so he was convinced, a much greater chance of success than an uprising in Germany. For he was skeptical of the rebellious virtues of a people whom he thought to be a race of "flunkeys."

Yet he decided to remain in Dresden and to risk his life — out of considerations of pure chivalry. To act otherwise, he said in his *Confession*, would have been cowardice. He saw how the uprising was bungled by incompetents or cowards; and he felt honor bound to lend his assistance to the one member of the Provisional Government who, though very moderate in his views, was made of the same heroic stuff as Bakunin himself. That man had decided to remain at his post, while most of the other leaders were trying to save their skins.

Bakunin's advice to the Provisional Government, valuable though it was, was unable to save a hopeless situation. His participation in the uprising, both as a military expert and as a combatant on the barricades, has earned him the reputation, somewhat exaggerated, of "dictator" of the Saxon capital during those five days. Yet his part was considerable enough to gain him the recognition of Marx and Engels, who certainly were not his friends, and who in their *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany* referred to him as the "able and cool-headed commander" of the insurgents. There are also those who, like Bernard Shaw, believe that Richard Wagner, himself a participant in the uprising, and personally acquainted with Bakunin, was inspired by the memory of the fearless Russian in creating his Siegfried.

## The *Confession*

Bakunin was arrested shortly after the superior forces of the Prussians had broken all resistance. The subsequent twelve years of his life formed a chain of sufferings such as few men of his time had to go through. Condemned to death by the Saxon Government, he was a year later handed over to the Austrian authorities, which, in turn, condemned him to death for his participation in the Prague uprising of 1848. But as the Hapsburgs owed a debt of gratitude to Tsar Nicholas I for his military assistance against the Hungarian revolution, Bakunin was given over to the Russian authorities. He had been chained to the wall in the Austrian prison at Olmutz. He was now placed in the dungeons of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, where he expected the torturer's rack and the firing squad.

But the Tsar reserved for him another kind of torture. He had heard much of the revolutionary fame of this ex-ensign of his own artillery. He now wanted to enjoy the sadistic pleasure of tearing more than the mere flesh and breaking more than the mere bones of so distinguished an enemy. So he sent to him his aide-de-camp with the polite invitation to make a clean breast of his past and to submit to the Emperor the confession of a repentant sinner facing his spiritual father. The Tsar, it must not be forgotten, was the religious leader of all orthodox Russians.

Bakunin accepted. For two months he was busy working on a sort of autobiography which began with his entrance into the artillery school and ended with his arrest in Saxony after the breakdown of the Dresden uprising. It was a long-winded spiritual self-castigation which reached the dimensions of a sizeable book. In fact, it was perhaps the only book which he really finished; for practically all of his other writings — in spite of their enormous cumulative volume — have remained unfinished fragments; just as his life, as he once put it, was only a fragment.

By friend and foe alike that *Confession* has been accepted as a sincere and authentic record of his opinions and actions up to the moment of his imprisonment; and so the ideas contained in it may be taken at their face value. But the historical and autobiographical gold contained in the document is heavily alloyed with the very base metal of humility and repentance, a manner of approach which was indispensable if the *Confession* was to be submitted to the man for whom it was written.

That tone of repentance makes very depressing reading for those who cannot help admiring the Promethean figure of the great rebel — much as they may disagree with his ideas or be repelled by many of his attitudes. However, it has often been pointed out that he certainly would not have assumed that tone if he had any chance of being tried publicly. Then he would have courageously defied his judges and paid with his life for the heroic gesture. But there was not going to be any trial. He had been tried and convicted in his absence many years before. And he was destined either to die quickly or to rot away slowly, his sufferings remaining unknown to the world at large. So he thought to outwit the enemy by pretending contrition — for a chance to have his penalty alleviated, that is to be sent to Siberia, whence he hoped to escape.

It was a compromise which later generations of Russian revolutionists did not consider honorable. Even before that time heroic revolutionists of nineteenth-century France, such as Barbes,

had insisted that there could be no conversation between captor and captive; that they belonged to two different species, between whom there could be no demand for mercy. But the situations were not strictly analogous. There was the publicity of the trials in the France of Barbes, and there was also a strong republican movement which would keep up the French rebel's "morale." On the other hand, Russia in those days was steeped in Oriental despotism, and Bakunin was a solitary radical while practically all the other Russian intellectuals of the time were still cowering in fear and passive submission.

Despite these attenuating circumstances, however, that humiliation would perhaps have ruined his reputation among his contemporaries had it become known at the time. But the Confession remained in the Tsarist archives for seventy years before it was discovered and published by the Bolsheviks. True, during a later period of Bakunin's revolutionary activities, after his flight from Siberia, the Tsarist authorities thought for a while of using that document to compromise the great rebel; they even prepared a pamphlet with extracts from it, but at the last moment they changed their plans. In Max Nettlau's opinion they were apparently afraid that a *Confession* couched in such humiliating terms might evoke the suspicion that it was obtained by torture. In the nineteenth century, strange as it may seem, the beneficiaries of Russian despotism somehow stood in awe of the public opinion of the civilized world. Unlike their Bolshevik successors, they did not have at their service an army of "liberal" and "radical" sympathizers ready to defend their worst ignominies.

However, the *Confession* remained without effect. Bakunin had at the very outset refused to mention any names, to render any services to the Tsar's police department. He insisted upon confessing merely his own "sins," not those of others. True, he attempted to cater to the Tsar's prejudices by emphasizing his dislike of and his contempt for the Germans<sup>1</sup> — but these were his real sentiments. He also spoke disparagingly of parliamentary methods — and here again his conceptions coincided with those of the Emperor, the difference being that Bakunin preferred his own anti-parliamentary dictatorship to that of the Romanovs. But to Nicholas he remained an unrepentant sinner as long as he did not turn informer.

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<sup>1</sup> "There is nothing that could be more narrow-minded, more contemptible, more ridiculous, than a German professor or a German in general."

## Banishment and Flight

Bakunin remained six years in the most terrible seclusion — four years in the Peter and Paul Fortress and two years in the dungeons of Schlüsselburg. In 1857 his mother obtained for him the permission to write a request for a pardon to the new Tsar, Alexander II, the later “Emancipator.” That letter was the greatest humiliation in Bakunin’s life; it was couched in terms of the most sickening servility and self-abasement, the work of a man whom mental and physical sufferings had all but broken. A Hercules and an Apollo only a few years before, he was now, at forty-three, a sick old man, disfigured and altogether toothless. Scurvy, the traditional curse of the old Tsarist prisons, had done its work.

That letter eventually opened the doors of his prison. He was brought to Western Siberia, where he settled in Tomsk, then only a small town. It was freedom of a sort, except that he was thousands of miles removed from what was his life element — political activity and struggle for power. He did not resign himself to his fate and never ceased hoping for an opportunity which would enable him to return to Europe.

The opportunity came soon enough. Eastern Siberia was at that time governed by Count Nicholas Muraviev-Amursky — the last name having been added in recognition of his merits in “acquiring” from China all the territory north and east of the Amur River. He was a sort of Empire-builder, combining some Western near-liberal ideas with the truly despotic brutality of an Asiatic conqueror. A second cousin of the great rebel, he met the black sheep of his family when on his trip across Siberia he stopped at Tomsk. The two men immediately took a liking to each other. The high-placed satrap enabled Bakunin to settle in Irkutsk, the administrative capital of Eastern Siberia, where the famous exile was in close contact with the powerful governor.

The period of Bakunin’s friendship with Count Muraviev-Amursky throws a curious light upon the Jekyll-Hyde nature of his character. Politically there had always been two souls in the breast of the great rebel. That part of him which soared to the stars dreamed of a thorough world revolution which would leave no stone of the old system unturned so that a new and better humanity might arise from the bloody welter of destruction. This was the Bakunin of the “Apostle of Pan-Destruction” legend, the Bakunin who became the father of revolutionary anarchism, the Bakunin who felt that it takes chaos to produce a dancing star — to use the expression of a German philosophical anarchist who was more outspoken in his aristocratic leanings than was the Russian nobleman. But there was also another Bakunin; the Bakunin who was a Russian nationalist, who idealized the Slavs as endowed with all the revolutionary virtues, and who dreamed of a modernized Slavic World Empire, not headed by a crowned despot or figurehead, but by a “republican” dictator; a Bakunin who hated the Germans and despised the Jews; a Bakunin, in short, who was a cross between a Fascist and a “Communist” dictator. The second Bakunin was very hard to kill; and it was only during the last years of his life that the Doctor Jekyll of international revolutionary socialism, erroneously called “anarchism,” overpowered the Mr. Hyde, who had the upper hand during most of his life-span.

Muraviev was not an ordinary Tsarist governor-general, to be sure. He was a man of vision, a “liberal” of a sort, who opposed serfdom and advocated a number of other reforms, short of parliamentary rule, however, which would have modernized the Empire. His sentiments and his dreams coincided to a large extent with those of Bakunin. He hated the Germans and hoped for a war with Austria and Turkey which would bring the Western and Southern Slavs into a great Slavic federation — under Russian hegemony, of course. His success as an Empire-builder in Eastern Asia doubtless evoked in his imagination a picture of himself in a similar role in Central Europe as well. As the victor in a war with Austria, he would have become the most powerful man from the Pacific to the Danube. Was he ever perfectly frank with his cousin about his supreme ambitions? At any rate, Bakunin saw in him the strong man with progressive ideas who was fit to become dictator of an immense Slavic realm; an enlightened dictator, of course, influenced by the ideas of the rebel who had had similar ambitions in 1848, but who, for the time being at least, was ready to play second fiddle. This vista made Bakunin close his eyes to Muraviev’s arbitrary methods of administration, which were opposed by practically all political exiles then in Eastern Siberia.

The liberty which Bakunin enjoyed in Siberia, even after Muraviev had left his post, eventually enabled him to escape. He succeeded in boarding an American vessel which was bound for Japan, and, after crossing the Pacific, the American Continent and the Atlantic, he arrived in London at the end of 1861.

# The London Exile

In London Bakunin found himself in the closest contact with Alexander Herzen and Nicholas Ogarev, Russia's veteran exiles and men of great literary merit. Both admired their friend's courage, but did not share his exuberant optimism. Moderate Liberals, they looked forward to a gradual Europeanization of Russia, but did not have much faith in violent attempts at hastening the process. The only point where their sentiments coincided with those of the fiery rebel was in their dislike for the Germans and their aversion to Karl Marx and his circle. That dislike was mutual. It had its roots not in the fact that Herzen's revolutionism was of a "bourgeois" tinge, while Marx's brand was "proletarian," as the official historians of modern socialism would have it. It derived chiefly from the clash of nationalist sentiments which were equally strong on both sides. Some of the things Marx and Engels had written in 1848–1849 equalled — and even exceeded; yes, exceeded! — in contempt for the various Slavic nationalities anything that a militant Pan-Germanist or Nazi could have written several decades later. To be sure, those stylistic exaggerations, which to this day make Slavic Marxists feel uneasy and apologetic, were prompted by a laudable eagerness to defend German democracy. But the Slavs, quite naturally, saw the facts and not the intentions. And nationalism being one of the original sins of man, they sinned in the same direction. In 1862, at the time when Marx was all immersed in the study of the mechanism of modern capitalism, Bakunin's chief hatred, as expressed in his letters written in 1862, was still concentrated upon the Germans.<sup>1</sup>

Bakunin's dislike for Marx was intensified by the memory of the attack printed in Marx's paper in 1848, and also by a chain of misunderstandings which led him to the belief that Marx was responsible for various slanderous remarks published in the British press while he was in prison. Marx was actually innocent in the matter, but he was not innocent of a certain Russophobia which even in his later years made him say that "With a few exceptions, all Russians who live abroad are agents of Pan-Slavism, and that Herzen was likewise such a Pan-Slavistic agent."<sup>2</sup>

The accumulation of old facts and new misunderstandings reopened the never completely healed wound, and during that year and a half, while Bakunin was staying in London, he never once visited the famous German rebel. He devoted himself exclusively to the cause of Slavic emancipation, the pet idea that had occupied all his thoughts in the late Forties.

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<sup>1</sup> Even in his *State and Anarchy*, which he wrote ten years later, during his internationalist-anarchist phase, there are such phrases as "He [the German] is made to be a slave and a master at the same time." (P. 246.) Or, "A German [when he says "I am a German"] means: 'I am a slave, but my Emperor is stronger than all rulers, and the German soldier who oppresses [strangles] me will strangle you all.'" (P. 248.) Or, to cap the climax, "In the German blood, in the German instinct, in the German tradition, there is a passion for State order and State discipline; the Slavs, on the other hand, are not merely free of these passions; on the contrary, passions of the very opposite order are active and alive in them." (P. 90.) All that was bad in Russian life he ascribed to Tartar-German" influence. Russia, to him, was a "Tartar-German prison" — an expression which he used in one of his articles published in Herzen's *Kokol*.

<sup>2</sup> Recorded in the reminiscences of Maxim Kovalevsky, famous Russian historian and sociologist, in *Russkaya Mysl*, Moscow, January, 1895, second part, page 71.



The two pamphlets he wrote during 1862 contain little to foreshadow the proletarian internationalist of six years later. The first of them, entitled *To My Russian, Polish and All Slavic Friends*, dwells upon his dreams of a federated Republic embracing all Slavs, every single Slavic nationality enjoying its autonomy as an equal among equals. Shortly afterwards, Bakunin turned to practical questions concerning not the Slavic world at large but his own country. Russia had just gone through two of the most momentous events of its nineteenth century history: the humiliating Crimean War of 1855, and the "Emancipation" of the serfs of 1861. The latter was partly a consequence of the great wave of dissatisfaction that swept the country after the war. The reform did not satisfy anybody. Revolutionary elements among the lower middle-class intelligentsia, and liberal elements among the land-holding nobility and the propertied middle-classes became more and more outspoken in their demand for a National Assembly. Apprised of what was going on in Russia, Bakunin decided to talk like a practical politician who demands only what is possible and uses all those materials which are at his disposal. The outcome of this "practical" turn was the second pamphlet, *The Cause of the People. Romanov, Pugachev or Pestel*. Pugachev and Pestel had been famous revolutionists of the eighteenth and of the early nineteenth century, respectively. Bakunin, apparently under the influence of his liberal friends Herzen and Ogarev, appealed to the Tsar to forestall the alternative of a bloody revolution, and to call a Constituent Assembly that would initiate a radical transformation of the country. "Due to human stupidity bloody revolutions are sometimes necessary; yet they are an evil, a great evil and a terrible disaster, not only to their victims but also to the purity and complete realization of the aim for whose sake they are accomplished. This was shown by the French Revolution." It was also in pursuance of these peaceful tendencies that Bakunin participated in the agitation for tendering to the Tsar a popular mass petition urging him to call a Constituent Assembly.

## The Polish Uprising of 1863

About a year after Bakunin's arrival in London, the Poles rose against Russian rule. The event was not unexpected. The radical and liberal elements among the Russians sympathized with the cause of their Western Slavic cousins, who had lost their national independence. Even Herzen, in spite of his moderation, championed their cause in his paper, *Kolokol* (Bell), both before and during the insurrection. It was a point of honor with every Russian progressive to take toward Poland an attitude similar to that which any decent Englishman would take toward the cause of Ireland.

Bakunin, like the other Russian revolutionists, saw in the Polish rising an opportunity to embarrass the Tsarist regime, to weaken it and thus prepare the ground for an uprising in Russia as well. He visualized the Polish insurrection as a peasant uprising which, he hoped, would spread to the Russian lands as well. But to the Polish patriots the idea of a peasant rising was more terrible than the continuation of Tsarist rule. On this point there was full agreement between the two wings of Polish patriotism: the "Whites" who represented the higher aristocracy and its hangers-on, and the "Reds" who were the party of the lower nobility and the intelligentsia. These Polish rebels were even opposed to a peasant rising in Russia proper, for fear that it might spread to the Ukraine, which the Poles claimed as their own, and even to Poland itself. They themselves hoped to win with the support of Western Europe, particularly of France. True, there were those of them who, like the heroic General Ludwik Mieroslawski, the Polish Garibaldi, did not oppose an uprising of the Russian peasants as a means of weakening the Russian Government. But the same Mieroslawski, once he became leader of the insurgents, threatened to shoot anyone who dared to give similar advice to the Polish peasants whose lot was not different from that of the Russian mujiks.

When the Polish insurrection broke out in January, 1863, Bakunin was eager to join the fight. A number of Russian officers of the Warsaw garrison were radicals at heart. With their assistance, Bakunin hoped to create a Russian legion that would help the insurrection. But the Polish National Central Committee was not anxious to have him in Poland. Not that they still distrusted his political honesty, as they had in 1848. But they were afraid that his presence would discredit them with the European powers for whose intervention they hoped. They were also afraid of the potentialities of his active collaboration. His old ideas of a Slavic federation, of self-determination of all Slavic nationalities, coupled with the possibility of a Russian revolution, meant a deathblow to their own cherished dream of a vast Polish empire that would include a number of subject races — another instance of that well-nigh biological egoism and greed, so characteristic of every nationalist and revolutionary group, which brazenly denies to other groups the liberties and the rights which it claims for itself.

Though rebuffed by the leaders of the uprising, Bakunin did not give up hope of playing a part in the events which were now unfolding. In February, 1863, he went to Sweden, where he would be nearer to Poland and to Russia. In Stockholm he learned that an international legion, composed largely of Poles, had sailed from London shortly after his departure. He intended to

join that expedition as soon as it reached Sweden. But the plan of the troop to cross over to the Russian coast of the Baltic, in order to start a guerrilla warfare behind the Russian lines, never materialized. Bakunin as well as the other members of the expedition remained stranded in Sweden.

## Farewell to Nationalism

Soon it became apparent that the Polish insurrection was a hopeless venture. Bakunin decided to return to Western Europe. However, there was no point in resuming his residence in London. He was not interested in English politics, and his relations with his friend and benefactor, Herzen, were strained. Herzen, who only a few months before had been the most influential figure in the liberal circles of Russia's privileged classes, was now thoroughly discredited in his own country. The underground circulation of his *Kolokol* shrank to one fifth of the original figure, and he blamed it on Bakunin, who had induced him to take a definite stand in favor of the insurgent Poles. For the latter had not shown themselves worthy of Russian liberal sympathies. They had coupled their struggle for independence with a claim for Lithuanian, Ukrainian and White-Ruthenian territories which, while not Russian in an ethnical sense, were "Polish" only by the historical "right" of ancient conquests. As between Polish and Russian imperialism, the Russian liberal was quite naturally inclined to favor his native brand. Russian reaction triumphed and Herzen was stranded — ideologically speaking. He had many merciless words for Bakunin's romantic enthusiasms.

Bakunin decided to settle in Italy, where the climate was healthier, and where it was possible to live on next to nothing, though he was very hazy about how to get even that. But such problems never worried him. Somehow he would always find some generous "creditor" who would postpone his financial crisis for another few months, and then there would be somebody else.

His choice of Italy marked a change in his political climate as well. The Polish adventure had given a great jolt to his enthusiasm for revolutionary nationalism. The Poles looked with hatred and contempt upon every Russian, even the most devoted friend of their liberation. They had their reasons, of course, for their "emancipation" implied to them among other things their own right to oppress other races. "Even the best Pole," Bakunin wrote to Herzen, "is hostile to us because we are Russians." There was apparently no reason for a Russian radical to make common cause with such revolutionists. Nor were the Austrian Slavic nationalists a much better lot. They abhorred a real revolution just as much as they hated the Germans. They merely preferred the Russian-Tsarist whip to that of their German and Hungarian masters...

During his stay in Italy, first in Florence and later in Naples, Bakunin gradually began to abandon that vague revolutionism that was ready to identify itself with all "good causes," such as revolutionary Pan-Slavism, or national independence, or liberalism, or even a sort of pro-Romanov Caesarism, provided the latter consented to take the initiative in improving the lot of the downtrodden Russian masses.

The breakdown of his hopes in the East no doubt stimulated this evolution. The revolutionary movement in Russia — still in its incipient stage — had been largely suppressed. Its best men had been arrested. Cut off from the Slavic revolutionary world, Bakunin turned to the West. National independence, except for Ireland, was no longer a problem there. Italy was practically unified, now that her foreign oppressors had been driven from her soil. But it was only a small minority of

property-owners, army officers, politicians and bureaucrats who had reaped the fruits of victory. There remained that countless army of educated “outs,” the proverbial lawyers without clients, physicians without patients, college graduates without positions and undergraduates without prospects. Not to speak of the still greater army of the altogether wretched workers and peasants, mostly illiterate.

Prompted by his hunger for action, Bakunin began to realize that it was these elements which held the key to the doors of the revolution. But that realization did not come all at once. During the four years between 1864 and 1868, he was still occasionally to fall back upon the old illusions that made him appeal to all men of good will among the well-to-do middle classes.

The condition of turmoil which during the past few years he had encountered everywhere convinced him that man was by nature endowed with “revolutionary instincts,” that a spark sufficed to set the masses in motion, and that there was no need for a long preliminary education and propaganda. That spark was the secret organization of determined revolutionists. Italy had had a long tradition of secret organizations ever since the invasion by Napoleon. These secret organizations had been the leaven of the struggles against foreign domination. They had also inspired the struggle for democracy in other countries of Europe. However, as his biographer, Max Nettlau, puts it, Bakunin also “realized that the masses have always been falling into the hands of new leaders.” As a remedy for this “lack of experience,” which prevented the masses from choosing the right path, Bakunin proposed his own “secret organization working invisibly among the masses.” With that self-centered naivete typical of political leaders, the Russian rebel (and his German biographer) innocently believed — or pretended? — that the leaders of his own secret organization, being “invisible,” could not possibly take advantage of the masses for the enthronement of a new aristocracy.

## Revolutionary Anarchism in the Making

Bakunin's non-Slavic activities began in 1864. At that time the International Workingmen's Association (usually called the First International) had just been founded, with Karl Marx as one of its most active leaders. Shortly after its founding, Bakunin made a visit to London, which was the seat of the organization. On that occasion he saw Marx for the first time in sixteen years. He apparently made a good impression upon the German scholar, who was almost misanthropic in his judgments about other revolutionists. In a letter to his friend and collaborator, Engels, Marx had only praise for the old Russian rebel, whom he found to have progressed intellectually instead of sliding back. Bakunin had told him of his decision to devote himself, from now on, to the socialist movement in the West. Marx expected Bakunin to work for the newly founded International, and particularly to counteract the influence of Mazzini, the great Italian patriot whose nationalism, religious mysticism, and spurious socialism were still dominating the minds of Italy's intellectuals.

Little that is definite is known about the ideological and organizational purport of Bakunin's activities during the first two years of his stay in Italy, where he soon transferred his domicile from Florence to Naples. He was apparently still working out his philosophy. His magnetic personality never failed to attract friends and admirers wherever he went. For there was an element of fascination in him which in another period would have been attributed to witchcraft. These friends formed a group of followers, first in Florence — with an exclusively Italian membership — and later, in 1866, in Naples. The group in Naples, chiefly Italian, included Poles and Russians as well. It was constituted as a secret organization and called the International Brotherhood. The Brotherhood later accepted into membership a few active French revolutionists and a Spaniard.

By the time the International Brotherhood was formed Bakunin had worked out its program and its bylaws. The program is known as the *Revolutionary Catechism*.<sup>1</sup> The bylaws were published under the title of *Organization*. Written by Bakunin at the mature age of fifty-two, these two manuscripts were the secret gospel of the first courageous apostles of modern anarchism, usually designated during its first phase as revolutionary or "anti-authoritarian" socialism. Yet these original scriptures are at the same time an unwitting refutation of the theoretical basis of anarchism as a political theory, an unwitting lampoon on the almost incredible lack of intellectual consistency in the founder of modern anarchism.

Max Nettlau admits that the *Catechism* of 1866 "is an immediate program of destruction and reconstruction which does not claim to show an anarchist society in its fullest completeness." In other words, it presents a system, such as the followers of Bakunin thought of establishing as a result of a victorious world revolution; a system that would form a transition from the various present-day forms of exploitation and oppression to the new system of collectivism and anarchism which would be built "on the basis of *liberty, reason, justice and work*."

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<sup>1</sup> Included in the German edition of Bakunin's works: Michael Bakunin, *Gesammelte Werke*. Berlin, 1921–1924, Vol. III, pp. 8–63. It is not to be confounded with the *Catechism of the Revolutionist* which Bakunin wrote a few years later, and which is referred to in the chapter about Nechayev.

That a “transition” would be necessary to bridge the gulf between the discomforts of the present and the delights of the faraway future is reasonable enough. But Bakunin’s “transitional” system differs in no important respect from any system that a party of democratic socialists would try to establish after a victorious revolution. It proclaims the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic. It introduces equality of political rights for men and women and insists expressly upon universal suffrage. It does away with appointed officeholders, judges, and so on: “All public, judicial and civil functionaries, as well as all national, provincial and municipal representatives, are to be elected immediately and directly by the people.” There are laws, penalties and prisons. To be sure, the latter word is not mentioned; but it is implied in the “abolition of all penalties of ... too long duration, which leave no hope, no possibility of a real rehabilitation,” and so on. There is a far-reaching political decentralization with the greatest possible autonomy of the provinces within the nation, and of the communes (municipalities) within the provinces.

In short, the whole political and economic organization was to be built up “*from the bottom, to the top and from the periphery to the center*” according to the principle of free association and federation.” To which Nettlau adds the timid comment that the words “below – top, periphery – center” are “in contradiction to present-day anarchist sentiment which prefers not to know of any ‘top’ or ‘center.’” “All of which shows that what is commonly designated as “anarchism” is merely a camouflaged form of decentralized democracy. At any rate, as far as the political structure is concerned, there is no difference of principle between the anarchist gospel according to Bakunin and the socialist gospel according to Marx. It is not a conflict as to “No-State” versus “State”; or “No-Authority” versus “Authority.” It was merely a difference of degree in the question of local autonomy or administrative centralization; and, as will be seen later, of tactics and of personal ambitions.

As regards the economic aspects of Society “on the morrow of the revolution,” Bakunin’s conceptions, as expressed in the *Catechism*, are a sort of anticipation of what is known as the NEP period of the Russian Revolution. The land was to be given over to those who cultivated it, which meant simply its distribution among the peasants, or possibly also the socialization of certain large estates. “The soil with its natural wealth is the property of all, but will be only in the possession of those who cultivate it.” The forests and the subsoil, as this passage is interpreted by Max Nettlau, would be socialized. The industries, however, would not be expropriated – they would be left in the hands of those who run them. As is well known to all students of the Russian Revolution, industry and commerce – except for the heavy industry and foreign trade – were likewise left to private enterprise from 1921 to 1928.

In Bakunin’s opinion, the transition to socialism – or “collectivism,” as he preferred to call it – would come about through the development of workers’ producers’ co-operatives and through the abolition of the right of inheritance. The latter would establish for everybody “equality at the point of departure.” In another passage the *Catechism* insists that, even after the elimination of the “inequality resulting from the right of inheritance, there will remain, though considerably reduced, that inequality which flows from the difference in the ability, strength and productive energy of every single individual.” The insistence upon inequality of rewards in accordance with a person’s abilities, productive energy and so on, has a familiar ring to those who know Stalin’s pronouncements upon the same subject, pronouncements which were inspired by certain passages of Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

## Saint Michael and Saint Ignatius

The document called *Organization* is to a certain extent even more revealing than the *Revolutionary Catechism*. It deals with the organization of the revolutionary forces and distinguishes two different organizations: “The International Family properly speaking, and the National Families; the latter to be organized everywhere in such a way as to remain always subordinated to the absolute guidance of the International Family.”

The International Family was to consist of “International Brothers,” of whom, in turn, there were two categories — “Honorary Brothers” and “Active Brothers.” The Honorary Brothers were what nowadays would be called “angels,” while the Active Brothers were the militants. The organization was secret, and all members were subject to strict discipline. However, it was the duty of the secret organization to build up open organizations wherever this was possible, the task of the latter being to win sympathizers.

The International Brothers constituted the higher aristocracy among the conspirators of Bakunin’s organization. They were, so to speak, the “Bakuninists of the first rank” in the terminology of the Blanquist societies of the same period. Bakunin believed that about one hundred International Brothers would suffice for organizing the world revolution. The “second rank” consisted of the National Families, which “constitute a degree of apprenticeship as compared with the great International Family. The object of this subordinate organization is, as far as possible, to connect the revolutionary elements available everywhere with the universal enterprise of the International Brothers.” Moreover, “The National Family of each country is formed in such a way as to be subject to absolute and exclusive control by the International Society.” Furthermore, “All members of the national Junta are appointed by the central directorate, to which the national Junta owes absolute obedience in all cases.” Thus obedience, discipline, subordination, and penalties for infractions of the rules constitute the leitmotiv of this famous classic of ... Anarchism.

It so happens that all of these methods and principles now form the basis of the organization of the Russian Communist Party and particularly of the Communist International. The complete subservience of all the national Communist Parties to the Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow; the arbitrary changes in party leadership by orders from Moscow; the nomination of all local party officials from above and not by election — it is all part and parcel of a preposterous paradox: that the unheard-of tyranny now exercised by the leadership of the Russian Communist Party is the intellectual child of a man who has gone down in history as the great enemy of all authority. (In fact the Bolshevik historian, Steklov, admits that Bakunin’s insistence upon the importance of a body of professional revolutionists was a sort of anticipation of Lenin’s methods of organization.)

There were others before Bakunin who had used similar methods. Among them were the Italian Carbonari, and later the followers of Mazzini, democratic-nationalist conspirators for the unification and liberation of their country. Bakunin was well-informed about Babeuf’s Conspiracy of the Equals in 1796, the first modern attempt at the establishment of a dictatorship of



revolutionary politicians, undertaken under the slogans of communism. The tradition of Babeuf, as handed down by Fi-lippo Buonarroti, the famous survivor of that conspiracy, was still very much alive during the Forties, when Bakunin was in Paris.

But there was also another source for his inspiration. He never boasted about it – but that source is unmistakably evident in that episode of his life which is dealt with in the chapter about Nechayev. It was the activity of the Jesuits, the “International Brothers,” as it were, of the Catholic Church, the brains and driving force of the greatest international organization in human history. Neither Michael Bakunin nor Ignatius Loyola need suffer by this comparison. Both were idealists in their own way, and the guiding passion of each of them was the salvation of mankind by the exercise of his “invisible” authority.

A letter written on February 7, 1870, contains a significant passage. “Did you ever ponder,” he writes, “over the principal reason for the power and vitality of the Jesuit Order? Shall I tell you the reason? Well, it consists in the absolute extinction of the individual in the will, the organization, and the action of the community. And I am asking you: is this so great a sacrifice for a really strong, passionate and earnest man? It means the sacrifice of the appearance for the sake of reality, of the empty halo for the sake of real power, of the word for the sake of action. This is the sacrifice which I demand from all our friends, and in which I am always ready to set the first example. I do not want to be I, I want to be *We*. For, I repeat it a thousand times, only on this condition will we win, will our idea win. Well, this victory is my only passion.” Coming from the father of modern anarchism, at the height of his *anarchist* activity, these ideas sound rather strange. Nowadays one is accustomed to hear such noble sentiments extolled only by the Fascists and the “Communists.”

There was one question which Bakunin left open, both in the *Catechism* and in the *Organization*: the question of power after the victorious revolution. There are courts, there are prisons, there are parliaments, there are functionaries, there are elections – but there is no government. For, while all the attributes of the government are readily accepted by Bakunin as inevitable, the words “government” or “power” seem to be taboo with him. He never tires of protesting against the establishment of a revolutionary government – in fact, he protests too much. In Bakunin’s conception, the place of the nonexistent government is taken by the “invisible dictatorship” of the International and National Brothers who “are to keep the revolution on the right path,” to use Nettlau’s interpretation of the thoughts of his Master. According to Bakunin and Nettlau the leaders of the secret organization, once they have become masters of the country, would stay in the background and nobly and disinterestedly advise the groping multitude and the budding bureaucracy how to build a new life without a government and without authority ...

At any rate, present-day Russia has neither a Tsar, nor a police, nor executioners – all these ugly words have been done away with.

## The League for Peace and Liberty

In 1867 Bakunin left Italy and settled in Switzerland. The authorities in Naples seem to have been disturbed by his propaganda among the younger generation of the Italian intellectuals. There was also something else. The imminent danger of war — the clashing ambitions of France and Prussia — had led to the formation of a society of middle-class pacifists called the League for Peace and Liberty. Its membership consisted of law-abiding, liberal lawyers, politicians, and journalists. The League had called a Convention in Geneva and apparently intended to establish a permanent committee in Switzerland. Bakunin all of a sudden felt the urge to take part in the Convention and to impress his ideas upon it.

This episode in Bakunin's life aroused much controversy between the followers of Marx and those of the Russian rebel. It is indeed hard to explain why the author of the ultra-revolutionary *Catechism* — at that time the document was known only to insiders — should have been so anxious to join a body that was opposed to any violent and thoroughgoing change in the existing system. Particularly at a time when the International had already been in existence for three years. The Marxist critics of Bakunin see in this attitude evidence of his lack of theoretical clarity. His mental confusion, they say, apparently did not permit him to see that it was altogether useless to make any attempts at converting respectable bourgeois to revolutionary ideas. There is much truth in the argument. The chaos in Bakunin's mind seems to have been as formidable as his bodily proportions. An internationalist, he had nevertheless deep prejudices against specific races, such as the Germans and the Jews. A "negator" of the State, he persisted in demanding the independence of Poland, that is, the creation of a new bourgeois State, even during his definitely anarchist phase when the Slavic problem was no longer paramount with him. An enemy of all authority, he was in favor of strict organizational discipline, hierarchy and subordination; a "democrat," as he often called himself, he believed in the necessity of a dictatorship during the transitional period following a victorious revolution. In fact, in 1867, Bakunin had not yet drawn those theoretical conclusions which might have deterred him from participating in a purely bourgeois convention. His thunder was not yet directed against the modern capitalists. In 1867 he did not as yet demand their outright expropriation but merely their gradual extinction through the abolition of the right of inheritance. His chief enemies — aside from the landed nobility — were still "God," that is the clergy, and the "State," in which he saw merely excessive administrative centralization. Any progressive bourgeois lawyer or politician could to a certain extent agree with him on these points. (In any case, two years later he had sufficiently revised his opinions to admit that it was a great "stupidity" on his part to have joined the League.)

Bakunin was not the only radical who participated in the first convention of the League for Peace and Liberty, held in Geneva early in September, 1867. Two fifths of the delegates to the convention of the First International held a few days earlier in Lausanne likewise took part in the pacifist assembly. The Russian exile spoke against the principle of nationalism and advocated the establishment of a system of decentralized democracy.

Bakunin was elected to the Central Committee of the League, which established its seat in Berne. During the following year his views went through a certain evolution. One might almost say that he became more aware of the antagonism between employer and employee. In addition to the seizure of the big landed estates, he began to advocate the expropriation of the means of production, which were to be taken over *by the workers' associations*. It is in connection with the adoption of this point of view that he began, in 1868, to call himself a "collecti-vist." This designation he opposed to those — including Marx and his following — who were commonly called "communists," and who advocated the seizure of the industries *by the government*.

By the middle of 1868 Bakunin joined the Geneva section of the International. He had succeeded in winning a few followers in the League, but in the latter part of 1868 he began to realize that he had wasted his time in trying to turn that body into an instrument of revolution. His Marxist critics sometimes insinuate that he wanted to use the League for the purpose of raising his own prestige, which in turn would enable him to exert greater influence the moment he entered the International. At any rate, he decided to make an honorable exit at the second convention of the League, which was held in Berne in September, 1868. He delivered several speeches insisting that the convention should commit itself to his demands for a "complete equalization of classes." It was his awkward way of advocating the establishment of a classless society. The final rejection of this proposal was for him and his followers the signal for resigning from the League for Peace and Freedom.

## Boring from Within and from Without

Insignificant as the entire procedure was in itself — not more than fifteen delegates had followed Bakunin's lead — it marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the socialist movement of the nineteenth century. In addition to those whom Bakunin had converted at the two conventions of the League, a number of International Brothers from various countries, whom he had won over between 1865 and 1867, had at that time assembled in Geneva. These were now urged by Bakunin to enter the International Workingmen's Association. At the same time they were to remain united in a secret organization that would be able to supply the "general staff of the revolution," or to constitute that "invisible dictatorship" which should prevent the popular upheaval from straying from the right path. These were the expressions which he liked to use in describing the role of those men who, supported by a secret organization, would be able to arouse the dormant revolutionary instincts of the masses.

That secret organization is known as the Alliance of Social Revolutionists, as the Secret Alliance of Socialist Democracy, or, briefly, as the "Secret Alliance." There is much about that secret organization that has never been definitely cleared up. Paradoxical as it may sound, one of its most prominent members, James Guillaume, the author of a voluminous history of the International, actually denied its existence, apparently in order to clear Bakunin's followers of the accusation that they were "plotting" against the International. The Secret Alliance and the old International Brotherhood were virtually identical for all practical purposes; but it would seem that the International Brothers were, so to speak, the inner circle of the Secret Alliance.

Bakunin's intention was to have the members of this Secret Alliance work within the International and gradually take possession of that body. He considered himself fully entitled to act that way because he was convinced that Marx and his group were controlling the International through the old secret Communist League which had flourished around 1848. He did not know that the Communist League had long since ceased to exist. But Communist League or no Communist League, Bakunin was determined to get control of the International. After all, he had the same right to aspire to its supreme leadership as had Marx, whose followers were likewise a minority within that agglomeration of political groups and trade union organizations professing a variety of social philosophies.

Bakunin's followers wanted more than simply a secret organization which, unknown to the public, would carry on its work within the International. They insisted upon an open international organization of their own, an organization that would publicly proclaim its revolutionary aims, and would openly compete with the International for the allegiance of the workers. Bakunin opposed the idea, but was overruled. So a new open international organization was actually created and was given the name of International Alliance of Socialist Democracy.

The open Alliance, although established for the express purpose of competing with the International, nevertheless applied as a body for membership in that organization. The intention of its leaders was to constitute themselves officially as the Left Wing, the frankly revolutionary faction of the International, and to maintain their full independence at the same time. The application

was rejected. As a result, the followers of Bakunin decided to dissolve the open Alliance as an international organization, and the various local sections applied separately for admission to the International. The request was granted. There could be no objections to their program: any radical or labor philosophy might be professed within the International, provided it was not in open contradiction to its general purposes: mutual aid, workers' solidarity, and the emancipation of the working class.

The program of the open Alliance included in condensed form many of the demands contained in the Revolutionary Catechism of 1866, such as the abolition of the right of inheritance, the insistence upon equal opportunity for all children to obtain education; the abolition of all religious cults; rejection of any policy based upon patriotism and upon the rivalry of nations. It recognized only a republican form of government and stated that "All political and authoritarian States existing at present ... will have to disappear in the universal Union of the free agricultural and industrial associations." It also put forth the demand for "the political, economic and social equalization of the classes and individuals" — a phrase which was to bring much ridicule upon its author.

## Birth Pangs of a Philosophy

Of greater importance than the public program of the Alliance was a document entitled *Program and Aim of the Revolutionary Organization of the International Brothers*. It was the secret program of the Alliance and was circulated only among the most intimate friends of Bakunin. It placed more emphasis upon such questions as revolution, revolutionary methods, destruction of the State, reorganization after the victorious revolution, the unleashing of the “evil passions,” that is, of the revolutionary instincts. It also contained many arguments against the “Jacobins or Blanquists” who were out for “dictatorship” and “State centralization.”

In some places the wording of the document was extremely careless. Thus in Section Six of the secret program it is stated that “the revolution, as we understand it, must from the very first day destroy, radically and completely, the State and all State institutions.” Section Eight, however, has it that “the new and revolutionary State” will be “organized from the bottom to the top through revolutionary delegations.” Which seems to indicate that Bakunin, when using the word “State” in a deprecatory sense, had in his mind merely a centralized body ruled from the capital in the manner of Napoleon the First.<sup>1</sup> In other words, his “destruction of the State” was merely a bombastic way of saying that the administration would be reorganized on the basis of democracy and local autonomy. His romantic desire to act the terrible man, fundamentally different from all other revolutionists, made him paint himself as a sort of Angel of Destruction who would annihilate every vestige of the old world.

Bakunin’s confused and inconsistent thunderings against the State were the reflection of a chaotic jumble of intellectual and emotional elements in his “theoretical” make-up. The philosopher in Bakunin, his quest for the “absolute,” made him absorb Proud-hon’s political idea of “An-archy” in the meaning of “No-government,” that is to say, the greatest possible realization of human freedom. But the man of action, the noble adventurer, the practical revolutionist, who was out for concrete achievements, forced him to contradict and confound the unearthly dreamer. Subsequently a verbal compromise was effected whereby a decentralized, democratic government, managed from behind the curtains by an invisible revolutionary oligarchy, was declared to be identical with “An-archy.”

That conflict between the two Bakunins, the anarchist and the revolutionist, occasionally led to curious contradictions. Thus in 1851 he writes about the inability of the Germans to get together for the purpose of concerted revolutionary action. And he blames it upon the fact that “anarchy predominates among them,” upon the German principle “that everyone may and should have his own opinion.” Twenty-two years later, in a passage in which his anarchist sentiment prevails, he attacks the same Germans because “they voluntarily submit to the most unbearable, the most insulting, and the harshest discipline.”

But there was also something else, aside from the purely spiritual conflict. Bakunin, in entering the revolutionary arena, had to contend not only with the old powers that be. He also had to face

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<sup>1</sup> The German State, he says in his *Gosudarstvennost i Anarchia* (p. 57), “is today (1873), in our opinion, the only real State in Europe.”

the fact that besides himself there were three other powerful contestants for the palm of supreme international leadership. There was the Frenchman Auguste Blanqui, the last offshoot of the glorious tradition of the Great Revolution and heir to the equalitarian myth of Gracchus Babeuf. Strictly speaking, Blan-qui's ambition did not go beyond the borders of France; but his methods<sup>2</sup> were gaining followers in various countries, even among the Poles and Russians. The seizure of power by a band of conspirators, who would impose a benevolent "socialist" dictatorship of the country's Capital over the rest of the nation, had a great fascination for many educated young men ready to risk their lives. Besides, Blanqui took it for granted that France would resume her old hegemony over Europe — thus virtually giving him supreme power over the European continent. And there was Joseph Mazzini, the great Italian conspirator, who actually nourished greater ambitions than the mere liberation and unification of Italy. He had a social philosophy of his own, a mixture of a vague, spurious socialism, religious mysticism, and plain national megalomania, which made him attribute to Italy the messianic role of leader among the nations.<sup>3</sup> The latest and most dangerous among the contestants was Karl Marx, a German and a Jew, endowed with glamour as one of the greatest savants of his time, and champion of the class struggle and of the "proletarian dictatorship"; the soul of the International Workingmen's Association, and thus quite obviously an aspirant to world power as well.

It was in the face of this competition for power that Bakunin had to propound tenets of a new faith which would be — or at least seem to be — at variance with those of his rivals. For, though the following is usually more interested in the personality of the Leader than in any theories he may preach, the theories constitute an absolutely indispensable badge by which the flock is given identity and solidarity. This does not of course prevent the theories from corresponding, on specific points, to the interests of specific groups among the mass of the following.

Thus Michael Bakunin had to resort to the immemorial device of Hassan, the fig vendor, who shouted, "Hassan's figs are biggest of all figs; Hassan's figs are ten times as big as they are!" Hassan-Bakunin simply shouted: "Bakunin's revolution is better than that of the other revolutionists; Bakunin's government is no government." As a result, Bakunin, though he was closely akin to the Blanquists — many passages of his Confession demonstrate it sufficiently — had to attack them very violently on the ground that they believed in dictatorship and State centralization, both of which he found deadly to the revolution. To their revolution "from above," as it were, he opposed the revolution "from below" and "from the periphery," the unloosening of "the evil passions" of the masses, the spontaneous initiative of the communities and of the provinces. This appeal to the initiative of the "periphery" had its very practical aspects: it was a bid for the support of the malcontent *declassé* intellectuals of the *provincial* cities. This group played a negligible part in the plans of Blanqui, who counted upon a successful uprising in the *capital*, where his followers would become the actual masters of the entire country.

More than anything else, his competition with Mazzini accounts for the great emphasis which Bakunin put on the question of atheism, or "antitheologism," as he called it occasionally. There is no doubt that by attacking religion he was trying to undermine Mazzini's authority among the many followers the old Italian conspirator still had among the workers and the intellectuals.

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<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on Blanqui.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Marx (dated February 7, 1865) Bakunin had written that "Mazzini is greatly mistaken if he still thinks that the initiative for the new movement [for democracy] will come from Italy." See also, in our chapter on Blanqui, the references to Mazzini's ambitions.

This preoccupation with religion led Bakunin to many absurdities — such as his insistence that the State was created by religion.

However, it was in his struggle against Marx that Bakunin was to show himself not only a polemist able to produce fireworks of questionable brilliance, but also a penetrating thinker and prophet who could raise problems which the German scholar was either unable or unwilling to see. But many things occurred before the conflict between the two giants came to a head.



## Theory and Practice

The contradiction between the libertarian postulates of Bakunin's anarchist philosophy and the authoritarian character of his system of organization was pointed out in connection with his *Catechism* and his *Organization*. That contradiction was bound to come to the fore not only after the victorious revolution, when that hierarchical body of "invisible dictators" would have revealed itself as a new aristocracy. It became obvious in the very relations between Bakunin and his own followers.

Two episodes from the history of Bakunin's conspiratorial activities are particularly illuminating. One of them occurred in 1869, shortly after the organization of the Alliance. One day practically all members of the inner circle actually bolted and called a secret meeting to which they did not invite the Teacher. From the indignant letter which Bakunin wrote to them on the subject — it was entitled *To All These Gentlemen* — it appears that his most intimate friends, the International Brothers, as it were, accused him of exercising dictatorial power. The truth of the accusation, paradoxically enough, is demonstrated by the fact that his resignation rendered his rebellious general staff altogether helpless and unable to carry on any activities. For he alone had all the threads in his hand, all the addresses, all the connections, all the information. Truly, it was a sort of one-man conspiracy, with the leadership principle going even beyond the monstrous absurdities which it has reached in the modern Fascist and Communist Parties. Yet it was done in the name of anarchism, the supposed antithesis of authoritarianism. There was a similar case of "mutiny" two years later, when the Geneva section of the open Alliance — it was the only section of the Alliance which had retained this name — simply decreed its own dissolution without consulting Bakunin. It was one of those rare moments when the anarchist conscience of his followers got the better of their "revolutionary" submission to the Leader.

In his letter *To All These Gentlemen*, Bakunin stated as his "innermost conviction" that "that man is, and always will be, the dictator, not juridically but actually, who acts, and only in so far as he acts in the spirit and in the interests of the society." Was there ever a dictator who did not make the same claim?

It was not Bakunin alone who thus sinned against the Holy Spirit of his own gospel. Two of his most active disciples — in fact, they were perhaps the only "men of steel" among his followers — were similarly stigmatized by their comrades as petty despots. One of them was Sergei Nechayev, whose story constitutes a separate chapter in this volume. The other was Michael Sazhin, who, after Bakunin's break with Nechayev, became deservedly the most favored disciple of the Teacher. And yet, no sooner did Sazhin begin his activities among the Russian intellectuals in Zurich, in 1873, than all of the other Russian followers of Bakunin rose against the authority of their Teacher's aide, and actually broke with the old man because the latter did not choose to separate himself from the young "dictator."

All of which fully justifies the suspicion that Bakunin's *anarchy* — in the sense of no-government — was merely a fancy-dress term for his antipathy to any dictatorship other than his own.

## The Game of Two Truths

Small as the Alliance was at the beginning, its influence soon spread beyond the confines of Geneva. Sections were formed in Southern France, particularly in Lyons and Marseilles. Bakunin's followers were likewise successful in Italy and in Spain. South of the Pyrenees the first initiative toward an impregnation of the labor movement with socialist ideas came from Italian emissaries of the Alliance. And not far from Geneva, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the new gospel was to find particularly fertile soil in the watchmaking communities of the Jura region. It was in one of these communities, Le Locle, that a young teacher by the name of James Guillaume ardently embraced the gospel of the fascinating Russian. He was to remain a faithful adherent for nearly half a century and to leave a minute record of Bakunin's activities in connection with the International and of the Alliance.

The first clash between the forces marshaled or influenced by Bakunin and those more or less controlled by Marx occurred at the Convention of the International held at Basel in September, 1869. It was caused by Bakunin's proposal for the abolition of the right of inheritance. That proposal was opposed not only by the followers of Marx but also by the Belgian delegates who took an intermediate position between Proudhon and Bakunin. It was pointed out that this was not a matter of principle, that the right of inheritance was only one of the manifestations of the right of property, and that the establishment of a collective form of production after the victorious revolution would render the abolition of the right of inheritance unnecessary. It was also argued that if moderate measures were to be taken for the purpose of avoiding too strong an opposition, then the same purpose could be much better served by high inheritance taxes and similar measures. All of which was perfectly logical, of course.

However, there were two extremely comical twists in Bakunin's proposal. In the first place, the proposal which was so ridiculed by Marx had undoubtedly been conceived by Bakunin under the inspiration of Marx himself. Twenty years earlier, Marx, in his famous *Communist Manifesto*, had recommended "the abolition of the right of inheritance" as Number 3 of the measures to be adopted when the "proletariat" would be in possession of "its political supremacy" — that is, after the victory of the revolution. In 1863, Bakunin himself, a few years before he began to work out his own program, had prepared a Russian translation of that classic of Marxist literature.

But that was not all. In 1866, when writing his *Revolutionary Catechism*, Bakunin had actually believed that the abolition of the right of inheritance would have to be one of those measures adopted after the revolution for bringing about a gradual disappearance of capitalism. In the meantime, that is between 1866 and 1868, he had become convinced that the revolutionary elements of the West were quite serious about the immediate establishment of collective ownership of the means of production "on the morrow of the revolution." So he himself adopted this point of view and incorporated it in the principles of his Secret Alliance, principles which were to be revealed only to the initiated conspirators. Immediately after the triumph of the revolution, these principles were to be applied under the "collective dictatorship" of his revolutionary general staff. However, while accepting advanced ideas in his secret documents, he was at the same

time considering the practical situation in those sections of Europe where his followers were particularly active. These were the economically backward countries in which the small rural and urban property-holders prevailed. He did not want to irritate them by a frank talk in favor of outright expropriation. Thus he was blowing hot and cold at the same time: painting himself pale pink in his public statements in order to safeguard his popularity among the peasants, and venting his ultra-revolutionary sentiments in the secret documents which were read only by the “insiders.”

This game of two truths is candidly confessed by Bakunin’s biographer, Max Nettlau, who presents the matter as follows: —

In general he [Bakunin] was at a disadvantage in discussions because the public knew and was supposed to know only one part of his ideas and plans, and because his secret activities were to remain concealed from it. Thus it happened that the report about the question of inheritance which on August 21, 1869, he submitted to a general meeting of the Geneva sections [of the International], attributed to this question an importance which it did not have any longer for those who believed in a collectivist revolution accompanied by expropriation. Besides, he himself later on paid less and less attention to that subject. This brought some disharmony into his activities in 1869.

“Disharmony!”

## The Lyons Uprising of 1870

The war of 1870 gave Bakunin the opportunity to test his theories. He foresaw and welcomed the breakdown of the Empire. He was all for the defense of the Republic, but he did not believe that the new regime would find enough strength to carry on the defense of France. In his opinion it was necessary to arouse the masses. On August 23, 1870, — that is, ten days before the downfall of the Empire, — Bakunin had written: “Paris and France can be saved only through a vast popular uprising. Everywhere the people must seize arms and organize themselves in order to conduct a war of destruction, a war to the death against the invaders.” In fact, he saw salvation only in the “spontaneous rising of the provinces.” The workers of the provincial towns would later be joined by the peasants.

In speaking about the possibilities of this popular upheaval Bakunin rose to the heights of a practical revolutionary statesman, as it were, devoid of any doctrinary squeamishness. He thought it would be possible and necessary to arouse the rural masses against the imperial authorities without saying a word against Napoleon III, to whom the peasants were still devoted. These authorities, as well as all the wealthy property-owners, would have to be attacked in the name of patriotism as the “Prussians of the Interior.” Similarly the clergy should not be attacked in any revolutionary decrees, except on the grounds that “they are Prussian agents.” All the violent measures against them should be carried out by the masses themselves, while, on the contrary, “the revolutionary authorities would pretend to protect them in the name of liberty of conscience.”

The proclamation of the Republic on September 4, 1870, enabled Bakunin to enter France without any difficulties. Any other revolutionist would have chosen Paris. But the Russian rebel preferred to go to Lyons. Paris was full of active revolutionists, particularly of followers of Blanqui. The “Old Man” of France’s declassé intellectuals was free now, and there was no chance of successfully competing with him. Blanqui had the rebellious young bloods of Paris well in his hand; his idea of a “Parisian dictatorship” over the rest of France was well adapted to their imagination, their ambitions and their appetites. The glamour of his martyrdom could well match that of Bakunin’s, even though in all other respects — physique, habits, character — he was the very opposite of the charming, courageous, garrulous, gluttonous and irresponsible giant. In fact, Bakunin had practically no outspoken followers in Paris. Those who had begun to see things his way did not come from the ranks of the intellectuals, as was the case with the Russians, the Italians and the Spaniards. They were the elite of the more educated workers, who had once adhered to Proudhon’s pacific and non-revolutionary anarchism. Now they were in a state of transition. The spontaneous class struggle of the horny-handed workers, as expressed by a wave of strikes for higher wages, had made them gradually veer to a position of “Left Wing Proudhonism,” whose followers were later to become either Bakuninists or Marxists — Bakuninism being at bottom only a heretical Left Wing variety of Marxism.

Bakunin, as anxious for power as Blanqui, had to beat the traditional “political revolutionists, the followers of an open dictatorship,” by something that would outdo them in the race for the

favor of the masses. Those advocates of an “open dictatorship,” he said in a letter which he wrote on April 1, 1870, — that is a few months before the Franco-Prussian war, but already in anticipation of the coming events, — “recommend that immediately after victory the passions should be appeased, that order and confidence should be restored, and that everybody should submit to the powers established by the Revolution. Thus they re-establish the State. We, on the contrary, will have to fan the passions, to arouse them, to unleash them and to call forth anarchy;<sup>1</sup> and as the invisible pilots in the tempest of the masses we shall have to be the guides, not through a visible power, but through the collective dictatorship of all Allies [members of the Alliance]. A dictatorship without a badge, without titles, without official rights, which would be the more powerful as it would have no appearances of power. This is the only dictatorship which I admit. But in order to be able to act it must be in existence, and for this purpose it must be prepared and organized in advance, for it will not spring into being all by itself, either through discussions, or through debates on matters of principle, or through mass meetings. Few members of the Alliance [are necessary] but they must be good, energetic, discreet, faithful, free from any vanity or personal ambition, strong men sufficiently serious, whose intellect and heart are on so high a plane as to prefer the reality of power to its vain appearance. If you form this *collective* and *invisible* dictatorship, you will be victorious; the revolution which is well conducted will win. If not, it will fail. If you amuse yourself at playing Committee of Public Safety, at [proclaiming] an official, visible dictatorship, you will be swallowed up by the reaction you have yourself created.”

This letter was addressed to Albert Richard, one of his followers in Lyons. In the middle of September, Bakunin himself was in Lyons, true to the statement he had made on September 3, 1870, the day *before* the establishment of the Republic, that “It was the immediate sacred duty of a large provincial city to take a salutary initiative [in arousing the masses]: for France will be lost, if nobody takes this initiative.”

For Bakunin that provincial initiative was also desirable as a counterpoise to the possible ambitions of the Blanquists of Paris, who might attempt to concentrate all the power in their own hands. In other words, Lyons was to become his capital, which would initiate a real popular uprising and spread it not only over the rest of France but over the neighboring countries as well. It took him nearly two weeks to convince his followers in Lyons to take that step which, in his opinion, was to change the course of European history. Late in September the masses in the city were showing signs of dissatisfaction. Bakunin and his friends constituted the *Committee for the Salvation of France* — which was apparently to be altogether different from the Committee of Public Safety that the Jacobins or other authoritarians were usually wont to establish. This committee issued an appeal which was posted on the walls of the city. It read as follows:

1. The administrative and governing machine of the State has become powerless and is hereby declared abolished. Once more the people of France are coming into their own.
2. All criminal and civil courts are suspended, and the justice of the people is substituted for them.
3. The payment of taxes and mortgages is suspended. Instead of the taxes there shall be contributions by the federated Communes, which shall be raised from

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<sup>1</sup> Here Bakunin used the word “anarchy” in the meaning of “chaos” or “disorder.”

among the rich classes in accordance with the requirements necessary for the salvation of France.

4. The State, having been abolished, can no longer interfere in matters concerning the payment of private debts.
5. All existing municipal administrations are abolished, and in all federated communes there shall be set up in their place Committees for the Salvation of France, which shall exert all power under the direct control of the people.
6. Every committee of a provincial capital shall send two delegates for the purpose of constituting the Revolutionary Convention for the Salvation of France.
7. This Convention shall assemble immediately in the City Hall of Lyons, the second largest city of France, which is best in a position to undertake an energetic defense of the country.

This Convention, which leans for support upon the entire people, will save France.

To Arms!!!

By proclaiming the abolition of the State in Section 1 of the document and the establishment of a “Revolutionary Convention for the Salvation of France” in Section 6, the father of modern revolutionary anarchism composed a satire upon anarchist theory which has never been excelled by any of its most bilious detractors. Had that Convention actually been established, and had it extended its authority all over France, the National Brothers would doubtless have been entrusted with the ordinary functions of government. And behind them would have stood Bakunin and some of his closest friends among the International Brothers, who, without any official authority, would have constituted the “invisible dictatorship.”

Hassan-Bakunin’s government was no government!

There was a bloodless uprising on September 28, as a result of which the City Hall of Lyons was for a few hours in the hands of Bakunin’s followers. Before they had time to constitute a government that would not be called a government, the revolutionists were dispersed by the National Guard. Bakunin, who showed great courage during the entire affray, was arrested, but eventually was rescued by his friends. His great experiment of playing upon the revolutionary passions of the French masses was over.

## The Struggle against Marx

Back in Switzerland, Bakunin resumed his residence in Locarno, a little town in Italian Switzerland to which he had moved from Geneva in 1869. From Locarno he conducted a voluminous correspondence with his active followers, whose number was growing rapidly all over Europe, except for England and Germany.

A conflict for power within the International became inevitable. That conflict has been described in the chapter of this book which deals with the life of Karl Marx. The official Marxist version of that struggle is still that of Engels, Marx's closest associate, who called Bakunin's activity "a conspiracy against the European labor movement." However, occasionally even Marxist historians feel compelled to disregard the traditional cant and to give a more realistic interpretation. Thus Y. Steklov, in his extensive biography of Bakunin, frankly admits that it was a conflict between "two groups of professional revolutionists who wanted to lead the labor movement." He even hints vaguely — an orthodox Marxist cannot afford to be quite explicit on this point — that Bakunin, who believed in the imminence of the revolution, saw in Marx's tactics the first symptoms of the anti-revolutionary opportunism of the Socialist Parties of the subsequent period. In Steklov's opinion, Bakunin's endeavors were "a prophetic anticipation of ... those organizational forms which were first elaborated by the Russian Communists."

In other words, Bakunin's "Alliance" was the Third International within the First International, which at that time had already all the characteristics of the "gradualist" Second International. Bakunin, it appears, foresaw the coming persecutions on the part of the various governments, and for this purpose he kept in readiness his underground organization of conspirators. Marx likewise foresaw those persecutions, particularly in view of the reaction which set in after the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871; but his remedy was the disbandment of the International by transferring its seat to New York. These two different attitudes were characteristic of the left-wing "romanticism" of Bakunin and the right-wing "realism" of Marx. That realism found its uninhibited expression in the famous anti-Bakunin pamphlet *L'Alliance de la Democratie Socialiste et l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs* which was published with the approval and collaboration of Marx. That pamphlet, the Marxist Steklov admits, was written in such a way that "it might seem — and it seems even now — that it condemns in general all secret, illegal revolutionary activity which is associated with violent methods."

## Intuition vs. Scholarship

Bakunin's struggle against Marx bore all the marks of tragedy. At bottom, aside from the "tempo," there was no deep theoretical dissension between the two men, even though in the heat of the struggle both sides occasionally tried to present the conflict in this light.

Personally, Bakunin, for all his bitterness, had a genuine, almost humble admiration for Marx's profound scholarship and great achievements in matters of social theory. In a letter to Marx, written in 1868, he had said: "You see, dear friend, that I am proud to be your disciple." True, the Russian apostle was often confused in his statements, but occasionally he would show a much deeper understanding of social phenomena than the great scholar. Thus Marx assumed that the State would disappear after the elimination of the capitalists. Bakunin, with one of his flashes of prophetic insight, foresaw the possibility of the continuance of the State and of exploitation as well, even after the disappearance of the capitalists. He had studied the situation in Serbia and had found that that country had neither capitalists nor big landholders; the entire population, composed of small farmers, was working to furnish an opulent livelihood to an enormous army of government officeholders who were the country's rulers and exploiters all in one.<sup>1</sup> After his expulsion from the International he began to visualize the potentialities of his opponents' victory on a national or international scale.

He proceeded from the well-known Marxist slogan of the "conquest of political power by the working class" as proclaimed in the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels (that Manifesto which, by the way, Bakunin was the first to translate into Russian). "If the proletariat is to become the ruling class," he asks, "whom is it to rule?" His reply is that it will rule over the peasant populace because of the latter's lower cultural level. Or — and here his old Slavic woe comes again to the surface — the Slavs will, for the same reason, "be slavishly subjected to the victorious German proletariat, just as the latter is now subjected to its own bourgeoisie." However, Bakunin fully realizes that the majority of the working class are devoid of education and thus unable to rule over anybody. The actual "proletarian government" will thus be in the hands of a "privileged minority." And he continues: "That minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps of *former* workers. And these, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people, will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the entire world of manual workers from the heights of the State. They will no longer represent the people, but themselves and their own pretensions to rule the people. Whoever has any doubts about that does not know human nature. But these selected men will be ardently convinced, and at the same time, learned socialists. The term 'scientific socialism,' which continually occurs in the works of the Lassalleans and of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bakunin, *Gosudaritvennost i Anarchia*, p. 100. That information he had no doubt obtained from a very gifted follower, a young Serbian student by the name of Nikola Pashitch, who forty years later, was to become the Serbian Bismarck and the creator of Yugoslavia. (Another young Serbian was at that time and for many years to come a sympathizer of the Marxist wing of the international socialist movement. His name was Peter Karageorgevich — a political exile from his native country. In 1903 he became King of Serbia, and the founder of the dynasty now ruling Yugoslavia.)



the Marxists, proves that the alleged People's State will be nothing else but the quite despotic rule over the popular masses by a new and not very numerous aristocracy of real or spurious savants. The mass is uneducated, which means that it will be completely free from the worries of government; that it will be included in the ruled herd."

A few pages later Bakunin further evolves that pipedream — to him it was a nightmare — of a Marxist seizure of power.

They [Marx and his friends] will concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand, because the ignorant people are in need of quite a firm guardianship. *They will establish a single State Bank that will concentrate in its hands all commercial-industrial, agricultural and even scientific production; and the mass of the people will be divided into two armies, the industrial and the agricultural, which will be under the direct command of government engineers who will constitute a new privileged scientific political class.* [Italics mine.]

This was written in 1873, when Bakunin was beginning to lose his faith and was on the point of giving up the struggle. Did he realize that the result would be hardly different if his own followers established their "invisible dictatorship" over the "ignorant people"? Forty-four years later a group of Russian revolutionists were to make real this vision of his pessimistic imagination by using his tactical methods and clothing them in Marxian language.

In these polemics against his Marxist rivals Bakunin unwittingly stumbled upon a new conception of class antagonisms, a conception which went far beyond the usual division into capitalist, bourgeois or employer, on the one side, and proletarian, worker or employee, on the other. Without formulating the idea, perhaps without giving it a further thought after he had written those lines, he intuitively pointed to the age-old antagonism not only between the "Haves" and the "Have-nots," but also between the "Knows" and "Know-nots." In a flash of insight he visualized the intellectual workers as the exploiting *masters of the future* after the elimination of the capitalists; and he thus paved the way for the Polish-Russian revolutionary thinker Waclaw Machajski, who about twenty-five years later devoted his writings exclusively to the question of the intellectual workers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An exposition of the views of Waclaw Machajski (pronounced Vatzlav Makhaysky) is given in Max Nomad's *Rebels and Renegades* (pp. 206–208, 239).

## The Expulsion and After

The struggle within the International ended with Bakunin's expulsion at the Convention held in 1872 at The Hague. That measure might have been justified *per se* on account of the underground activities of the Secret Alliance, which was out to conquer the International. But the scandalous methods by which it had to be effected "proved that by this time the "conspirators" were no longer a scheming minority but the actual majority within that organization.

The expulsion, while preventing the conquest of the International as a body, did not stop the spread of Bakunin's ideas in those countries in which they had succeeded in gaining a foothold. His German-speaking followers had always been very scarce, and as for England, he was still waiting for his first convert. So, while the official International was transferred to a silent grave in New York, the Spanish, Italian, Swiss and other national federations constituted themselves as an independent "anti-authoritarian" International, which held its annual conventions until 1877, when anarchism, outside of Spain, gradually began to ebb away as a mass movement.

Bakunin's enemies were not resting. In 1873, about a year after his expulsion, a pamphlet was published under the title *The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Workingmen's Association*. Its unsigned authors were Friedrich Engels and Paul Lafargue, the latter a son-in-law of Karl Marx. It contained various authentic documents relating to the activities of the Alliance, but its value was destroyed by exaggerations, unconfirmed gossip, and plain untruths. The Marxist historian, Y. Steklov, is obliged to admit that occasionally the presentation of the facts is "quite incorrect." In this respect the pamphlet, published with the collaboration of Marx himself, was self-defeating, even though many of the strictures on Bakunin's past were likely to injure his reputation.

The appearance of this pamphlet had, or seemed to have, a crushing effect upon the further activities of Bakunin. He sent two letters, one to the conservative *Journal de Geneve*, and another to his friends of the Jura Federation of the International. In the letter addressed to the newspaper he protested against that feature of the pamphlet which constituted an actual infraction of the tenets of revolutionary and ordinary ethics: the public attack upon the Alliance, which was thus denounced to the police as a secret society. He also protested against various slanders published elsewhere, and wound up with the statement that "all this has disgusted me profoundly with public activity. I have had enough, and I am tired after having passed all my life in the struggle." Referring to his age and to his poor health, he added, "I have neither the strength nor perhaps the necessary faith to keep on pushing the stone of Sisyphus against the reaction which is triumphant everywhere. As a result, I am leaving the field. The only thing I demand from my dear contemporaries is that they should forget about me. From now on I am not going to disturb anybody's rest. In return, I wish to be let alone."

The moving letter addressed to his followers in Western Switzerland, though written in a somewhat different tone, likewise served notice that he was retiring from all revolutionary activities.

## Ruse and Reality

By those of Bakunin's followers who were in his intimate circle this announcement was not taken at its face value. Bakunin had various reasons, so they thought, for making the authorities believe that he was out of the revolutionary game. The fate of his former friend Nechayev, whom the Swiss authorities delivered to the Russian police, had put in question his own safety in the mountain republic. Rumors were current that the Swiss Government intended to confine him somewhere in the interior of the country, where he could have no contact with the outside world. He began to contemplate the plan of acquiring Swiss citizenship. A devoted Italian follower, Carlo Cafiero, the scion of a very rich family, was ready to help him. He bought, and legally transferred to Bakunin, a villa in the Italian-Swiss town of Locarno, where his teacher had been living since 1869. As a country gentleman, the Russian rebel would thus be more easily eligible for citizenship in that democratic republic.

However, the country-house in Locarno — its name was La Baronata — was not to be merely a shield for Bakunin's respectability. At the same time, it was to serve as a sort of arsenal, secret printing plant, and refuge for Italian revolutionists who were preparing an uprising in their country. Neither Bakunin nor Cafiero bothered much about the question as to how this aspect of the Baronata could for any length of time remain a secret to the Italian and Swiss authorities, inasmuch as Locarno was a rather small place.

So Bakunin's retirement was to be, so to speak, the beginning of a new phase in his revolutionary activity. Yet in fact the reasons given in the farewell letters were essentially valid. The old fighter was tired, disgusted, and disappointed. He was physically a very sick man, his health having suffered greatly as a result of his eight years in prison and his Bohemian habits. His disappointment did not date from his expulsion from the International. It apparently began as far back as the first "mutiny" of the International Brothers against his dictatorship in 1869; it was probably aggravated by the conflict which he had had with his favorite disciple Nechayev, a conflict which made him realize to what depths of baseness political fanaticism and will to power might lead even the best fighters for the revolutionary cause. Shortly after that break there had come his venture in Lyons, in September, 1870. He had looked forward to a glorious unfolding of popular passions that would mark the beginning of similar movements in many European countries; but it had all ended in the dismal fiasco of a harmless riot. The tragic course of the Paris Commune of 1871 was a further blow to his revolutionary hopes.

The Spanish Revolution of 1873 was perhaps an even greater disappointment than the Lyons fiasco. South of the Pyrenees his followers controlled the labor movement — yet the revolutionary situation caught them completely unawares. They did not know what to do with it, and more often than not made themselves and the cause of anarchism ridiculous by helping local radical politicians to seize power. The tired old man wanted to go to Spain — no longer, it seems, in the hope of turning the struggle into a real outbreak of popular passions that would differ from ordinary changes of government. Did he begin to realize the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies of his "anarchism"? At any rate, the chief purpose of his contemplated trip was to

meet with an honorable death in battle. But his “angel,” Cafiero, this time refused to advance the necessary funds. He wanted to preserve Bakunin’s life for the revolution in Italy whose outbreak was expected soon.

# Disgrace

The readiness “to die like Samson” — this was the expression he used in one of his letters to the poet Ogarev — was all that was left of his ancient revolutionary passion. He had lost faith in the revolutionary instincts of the masses, and, where this did not exist, there was no hope of victory. Denied the opportunity to die like the Biblical hero, he slowly began to disintegrate.

Cafiero had inherited part of his father’s fortune. The comparatively large amount which he received immediately after his father’s death he placed at the disposal of Bakunin — to be used for the cause of the revolution. A noble character, but altogether unpractical, he did not realize that Bakunin was the last man to know what to do with money. Thinking that Cafiero’s resources were unlimited — or, more likely, not thinking at all — the tired rebel began to spend the money for the improvement of the Baronata, the future secret headquarters of world revolution, as it were. In reality, however, he was building a comfortable nest for his wife’s family. (In Siberia, he had married a young Polish girl who always remained a perfect stranger to all his ideas. It was believed he had taken that step with a view to his contemplated flight, for the authorities were less suspicious of, and therefore less vigilant with regard to, the movements of married men.)

In lavishly spending the money on the improvement of the property, Bakunin hoped that in two years the place would become self-supporting. On less than one acre of land! After a few months, practically all the money was in the pockets of a dishonest contractor, or had been wasted on the support of various “comrades” and their hangers-on, who lived in the house, and to whom Cafiero’s money was a matter of little concern.

When Cafiero returned from a few months’ absence, he realized that the war chest for the Italian and a few other revolutions was practically gone. His well-nigh religious devotion to his Russian demigod turned to bitter rage. His sentiments were fully shared by the Russian Michael Sazhin and the Swiss James Guillaume. These were the three men closest to Bakunin — but they showed no mercy to the old hero who had now reached the phase of physical and moral disintegration.

It has not been definitely established whose idea it was that there was nothing left for Bakunin but to die in glory. An uprising was at that time slated to break out in Bologna. It was believed that it would spread all over Italy. In a moment of sudden realization of how he had disgraced himself, he seems to have offered to go to Bologna and to die fighting. When he reconsidered and showed an inclination to die in bed, as behooves a general, Cafiero and Sazhin practically forced him to abide by his word — or by their decision. The Bolshevik historian Steklov is very bitter about their callousness toward a dying old man.

He forgets that to them Bakunin was more than a human being — he was the very symbol of the revolution, the very symbol of their faith. It was not the stain of his personal disgrace that he was to wash clean in his own blood — it was the good name of their cause that was to be redeemed from the ridicule that would bespatter it if the truth were to leak out.

Fortunately or unfortunately for Bakunin, the uprising in Bologna never went beyond its embryonic stage. There was not even an attempt at a fight and nothing was left for Bakunin but to

go back — to face his followers again. What he felt at that time he expressed in his *Memoire justificatif* addressed to his wife and to his closest friends. That document was written on his trip to Bologna, that is, on his way to a certain death, as he believed. Two ideas stand out in this moving apologia of a dying man: his complete disillusionment, and, as Guillaume puts it, “the weakness of an old man for a young woman who was a stranger to us and who did not sympathize at all with the ideas which were dear to us.” His disillusionment Bakunin expressed in the following words: “First of all, I am really tired and disillusioned. The events in France and Spain have dealt a terrible blow to all our hopes, to all our expectations. We have reckoned without the masses, which did not want to become impassioned for their own emancipation, and, this passion being absent, what good did it do to us to have been right theoretically? We were powerless.” To his friends the document was the final evidence that “Bakunin was no longer the man he had been.”

The old heroic Bakunin was now dead. He actually withdrew from all revolutionary activities — even his personal relations with his old general staff ceased. The final conversation which he had with his most intimate friends late in September, 1874, ended with a complete break in his political and personal relations with all of them.

# Despair

However, he was not altogether cut off from his past. Having left Locarno — he had to return the Baronata to Cafiero — he settled in Lugano, about twenty miles distant from the place of his great hopes and disappointments. It was the old heartbreaking misery and uncertainty again. From Lugano he continued his correspondence with his old friends, most of whom knew nothing of his difficulties with Cafiero. But these letters were no longer epistles of propaganda or political pamphlets. Their tone was as depressed now as it had been enthusiastic prior to 1873. His only consolation was the nearness of death. The triumph of reaction all over Europe made him visualize a period during which “the negation of everything that is human will triumph.” In short, he felt exactly as any civilized person feels at present when he beholds the progress of fascism — black, brown and red — all over the world. The same dejected mood emanates from the letter which, four months later, that is early in 1875, he wrote to his friend and comrade, Elisee Reclus, who was on the way to becoming one of the greatest geographers of his time. There he repeats the idea which was the repudiation of all his previous preachings: that “the masses were devoid of revolutionary thought, hope and passion, and that, so long as these did not exist, nothing could be done.” In that letter he spoke of the strength of “international reaction [which was] formidably armed against any popular movement. It has made of repression a new science which is being taught systematically in the military schools of all countries.”

Did he abandon all hope? No. “There remains another hope,” he writes to Reclus: “the world war. Sooner or later these enormous military states will have to destroy and to devour each other. But what an outlook!” That world war came exactly forty years later. It actually brought in its wake a whole period of revolutions whose leaders were largely animated by the ultra-revolutionary concepts preached by Bakunin. *For basically most of Leninism was merely Bakuninism clothed in Marxist verbiage.*

Another symptom of his resignation was his renunciation and denunciation of the methods of political amoralism. “Realize at length,” he wrote to Sazhin on October 21, 1874, “that nothing living and firm can be built up upon Jesuitical trickery; that revolutionary activity, if it is to succeed at all, must not seek its support in mean and base passions; and that no revolution can achieve victory if it is not animated by a lofty, humanitarian ideal.”

## The Last Year

It was only natural that with the loss of his faith in the nearness of the revolution Bakunin began to take a different view of those political changes which formerly seemed to him only a ripple on the sea of human history without any lasting importance for the ultimate destinies of mankind. He became greatly interested in the struggle between Bismarck and the Catholic Church. Much as he hated the Iron Chancellor as the embodiment of a Pan-Germanism that wanted to enslave the rest of the world, he apparently detested still more the spiritual power of Rome, and he saw in its defeat a step forward. He was quite jubilant in 1876, shortly before his death, over the victory of the republicans in the parliamentary elections in France, for that victory once and for all disposed of the danger of a monarchist restoration. "World liberty is saved," he exclaimed, "it is saved once more by great France." The Apostle of Pan-Destruction had become a worshiper at the shrine of democracy.

That last year in Lugano brought a reconciliation with those who had been closest to him and who had hurt him more than anyone else had done. Carlo Cafiero, the Italian dreamer, and Michael Sazhin, the Russian man of action, who had both broken with him definitely a year before, came to see him in his retreat, and something resembling the old cordiality was re-established. However, closest to him were not these intellectuals in whose eyes he had failed when he showed human, all too human weakness. His most devoted friends were a few humble semiliterate Swiss-Italian workers in Lugano. They did not know that he had lost his faith. To them he remained the symbol of the coming social revolution, the symbol of their redemption from misery and ignorance. Taking turns day and night, they voluntarily nursed the sick old man, and listened to his words with that religious awe which members of a primitive tribe may feel for the Old Man who is the Patriarch and the Prophet in one.

The last weeks before his death brought the complete breakdown of all his hopes for material security in the few years he still expected to live. His share in his father's estate was finally paid to him by his surviving brothers, but the amount did not even suffice to pay all the debts he had contracted in Lugano. He decided to turn his back on Switzerland and to settle in Naples. But he went to Berne first, to have his health restored or to die, as he told the physician. He was beyond recovery. Two weeks later his agony was over.



## The Offspring

About the time of Bakunin's death Michael Sazhin, most prominent of the old man's followers, was arrested by the Tsarist police. Practically the entire generation of young idealists who followed Bakunin's call to "go among the people" was ideologically under the spell of the famous exile.<sup>1</sup> Those around Sazhin, the so-called "Buntary" (Insurgents), were the Bakuninists proper. Their idea was to start local peasant uprisings with the hope of fanning them into an upheaval on a national scale. After the arrest of Sazhin, they did not survive long as an independent revolutionary force. In fact, the "Buntary" never succeeded in calling forth a single peasant uprising. With all the defects inherent in the "Emancipation" decree of 1861, the lot of the peasants had been improved as compared with their previous situation. They apparently had no inclination to risk their lives for more.

It was well-nigh symbolical that simultaneously with the disappearance of Sazhin behind prison walls, there occurred the escape of Peter Kropotkin from the dungeons of the Peter and Paul Fortress. That escape marked the beginning of his revolutionary career in Western Europe, and the end of Bakuninism as the theory and practice of anarchism. For Kropotkin, jointly with a few of Bakunin's surviving friends, undertook the "reformation" as a result of which anarchism became the creed of a sect of millennial, though sometimes violent, dreamers. In a way it was only another aspect of Bakunin's loss of faith in the imminence of revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few, and certainly not the worst, of Bakunin's followers became stranded in the lofty irreconcilable idealism of a Kropotkin or a Malatesta.<sup>3</sup> Most of the others — outside of Spain — went the way of all political flesh. Even in the economically backward countries a developing industrialism was gradually producing a vast stratum of skilled industrial workers, easy to organize and averse to violent methods. The possibilities of a political career without conspiracies and barricades were opening to many of the desperate elements of the educated lower middle-class youth. During their struggle against Bakunin, Marx and Engels had called these declasses the "dregs of the bourgeoisie." Now most of the once fiery Bakuninist intellectuals began imperceptibly to imbibe Marx's Sancho Panza wisdom of revolutionary words for the future and peaceful deeds for the present. Their ranks included such famous figures as Andrea Costa in Italy, Guesde and Brousse in France, Plekhanov and Axelrod in Russia. These "down-and-out bourgeois" as Engels<sup>4</sup> had dubbed them a few years earlier, were quite welcome now. All these former worshipers at the shrine of the great Russian were eventually to become founders of parties drawing their inspiration from Marx and sometimes even outdoing him in opportunism. Psychologically, this transition was easy. Under the changing conditions of a theoretically "doomed" but actually

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter on Nechayev.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on Johann Most.

<sup>3</sup> For a short history of modern anarchism from the death of Bakunin to the present, see M. Nomad's *Rebels and Renegades*, Chapter I.

<sup>4</sup> Engels used the word "*verkommen*" which has no exact equivalent in English. It has the connotation of de-praved, dilapidated, gone-to-the-dogs.

still quite flourishing capitalism, most of Bakunin's disciples sooner or later experienced their former Teacher's disillusionment as to the imminence of a socialist revolution. And a cooled-off conspirator automatically becomes a "gradualist" — if he is still interested in the political game.

Toward the end of the last century the most militant elements among the anarchists returned to Bakunin, as it were, even though the movement in which they now became active was officially not associated with the name of the Russian rebel. This was that cross between anarchism and socialism which is called "syndicalism" or "anarcho-syndicalism." To a certain extent it sprang from the ideas current in the Swiss Jura Federation of the First International. The "Jurassians," led by Bakunin's Swiss disciple, James Guillaume, accepted the trade unions both as instruments of the working class struggle and as the basis of the social reconstruction after the victorious revolution. They completely disregarded the question of political power as well as the conspiratorial methods which Bakunin had recommended for obtaining it, even though he never openly admitted such intentions.

During the Russian Revolution of 1917 Bakuninism proper celebrated a sort of resurrection in the movement connected with the name of Nestor Makhno.<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of some moderate Socialists, the Bolshevik Revolution itself represented "the victory of Bakuninist unculture over Marxist culture." Their viewpoint is to a certain extent confirmed by the well-known Soviet historian<sup>6</sup> who declared that the methods advocated by Bakunin in 1848 were "in many points practically an anticipation of the Soviet power and a prediction, in general outline, of the course of the great October Revolution of 1917." Lenin, by the way, and the other conspirators who prepared that Revolution, had received their Marxism from ' \*}eorge Plekh-anov, who had been a fervent disciple of Bakunin before he became the founder of Russian Marxism, and thus the teacher of Lenin. Plekhanov, the renegade of Bakuninism, opposed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, while Lenin reverted to many of Bakunin's concepts which he passed as Marxism.

In one of his whimsical moods Alexander Herzen called his friend Bakunin a Columbus without America. Intended as a good-natured gibe, that designation was a prophecy of which the great Russian stylist was altogether unaware. The great Genoese sailor thought he had found India when in reality he had discovered a new continent. Bakunin thought he had found the road to the heavenly Utopia of Anarchy. What he actually discovered was the path to the infernal reality of Dictatorship.

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<sup>5</sup> See the chapter on Nestor Makhno.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Steklov, *Mikhail Bakunin*, Vol. I, p. 343.

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Max Nomad  
The Heretic  
Michael Bakunin, "Apostle of Pan-Destruction"  
1939

Retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020 from [www.ditext.com](http://www.ditext.com)  
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